

Confronting issues of gender and ethnicity: Women's experiences as aspiring urban principals

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This article examines, from a female perspective, the complexities of gender and ethnicity embedded in successful urban school leadership. The authors use qualitative data, collected from female participants in two cohorts of aspiring urban principals in a yearlong experimental leadership preparation program, to discuss issues that arise during the coursework mentoring and school internship components of the program. Recommendations for future programs, drawn from the study, include selecting program participants based on their commitment to social justice, utilizing opportunities to confront gender and ethnic leadership stereotyping, providing the training to conduct school dialogues on social justice issues, and exposing aspiring principals to ethnically diverse urban school environments.

Women seeking leadership positions in urban school districts face many challenges but can, potentially, reap many rewards. All urban school administrators must confront complex political, socio-economic, and pedagogical issues regardless of gender and ethnicity. For minority women—for the purposes of this study we acknowledge that all women are “minority” within the context of urban school leadership—these issues are frequently compounded by negative perceptions of female leadership competencies and gendered ethnic stereotypes. Yet, it is vital that women teachers from urban schools are inducted into positions of school leadership and given the training to be

successful leaders of multicultural schools where equity issues presently loom large. It is vital both to satisfy issues of social justice at the school leadership level where men's and women's voices should equally be heard, and to allow women to apply understandings gained from their own gendered and ethnic experiences to the problems faced by many of their students from struggling urban communities.

This study is based on data collected from the women in two cohorts of teachers selected for an experimental leadership preparation program for aspiring urban principals. The program sought to socialize the participants into the culture of urban

school administration and leadership. In addition, programs training participants specifically for urban school leadership must, by definition, seek to provide participants with an understanding of the challenges involved in leading for the equitable treatment of all students in the diverse social and cultural environments of urban schools. The program strived to achieve this through analysis of the day to day experiences of participants as they moved through the program and internship.

The aims of the program were clear and gender neutral. What was less clear, and what we chose to examine, was whether an urban leadership program could offer women participants opportunities to reflect on their gendered and ethnic/cultural understandings and experiences to inform their future leadership experiences. Many of the participants in the program had grown up in city neighborhoods and were students and then teachers in urban schools. These women and men were now opting, often with passionate commitment, to undertake the leadership of these schools. In so doing, the educators were choosing what must be one of the most challenging career options in the nation today, and they would need to muster all of the leadership strengths they possessed to survive and be successful (Kimball & Sirotnik, 2000). We believe that men and women have different understandings of social injustice as it plays out for many urban students. We believe that for women building professional careers their unique understandings would be a strength that a leadership preparation program

could help these women recognize, develop, and use to the benefit of the schools they would lead.

The Context of the Study

The experimental preparation program for aspiring school principals used in the study was situated in a major city on the east coast of the U.S.A. The program was operated for two years by a university partnership, the city school district, and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) under a grant from the U.S. Department of Funded Schools. The program consisted of several research-based components designed to provide academic, practical, and professional support. These included two weeks of study in residence at the university's Urban Leadership Institute, which included the presentation of case studies, addresses by guest practitioners, and academic course work. The residence was followed by a yearlong internship in schools within the urban school district selected as having excellent leadership where participants received formal mentoring from the school principal. During the internship, participants met one day a week with the program director, a retired city school leader. This day was used for presentations by guest speakers, discussions of the events of the week experienced by participants in the city school, and additional course work required by the university. The intern experience was followed by a second summer Urban Leadership Institute at the university. Participants were granted a master's degree in

educational leadership upon completion of the program requirements, and principal certification on completion of the State's examination for Principal Certification.

The first cohort, Cohort 1 (July 2004-2005), consisted of eleven aspiring leaders, including eight women (two White, two Hispanic, and four African Americans). The second cohort, Cohort 2 (July 2005-2006), consisted of ten participants, including seven women (three White, one Hispanic, and three African Americans). All participants were practicing teachers in the city school district. Selection processes for the first and second cohorts differed. The participants in Cohort 1 were approached to participate in the program based upon the recommendation of their principals, whereas the participants in Cohort 2 applied for inclusion in the program and were selected from approximately forty applicants.

The diversity of the program participants' social and ethnic backgrounds reflects the diversity of the communities in the urban school district in which the study was located. Schools with predominantly African-American students may have predominantly White teachers and administrators, while schools with highly diverse populations that include Asians, Hispanics, and African-Americans may have teachers and administrators with equally diverse ethnicity. In addition, women outnumber men at the elementary school level both as teachers and administrators, while White men continue to hold the majority of higher level positions in secondary education

and at the district level—a pattern found in comparable urban areas around the U.S. (Gates, Ringel, Santibanez, Chuang, & Ross, 2003; Strizek, Pittsonberger, Riordan, Lyter & Orlofsky, 2007). Another comparable trend has been the movement of African-American women into elementary school headships in this school district during the 1990s. They currently represent approximately 60% of elementary principals. This situation has been interpreted by some commentators as the feminization of tough jobs that men do not want, which is often accompanied by a loss of autonomy and prestige for these positions (Mertz & McNeely, 1994; Riehl & Byrd, 1997).

Leadership challenges in the urban school district of the study are many and varied. They include high drop-out rates for both African-American and Hispanic adolescent boys, large numbers of families coping with social and economic problems that affect the learning potential of their children, and the struggle to accommodate students lacking fluency in English or needing special help. Under these conditions, many teachers lack the confidence or motivation to bring about changes in school climate and student outcomes (Gooden, 2002).

Aims of the Study

We sought an answer to the question of how issues of gender and ethnicity affect women aspiring to be urban school leaders, both on the level of gaining recognition as effective leaders and in demonstrating empathy

and activism for social justice. Since our participants grew up in ethnic enclaves, or had been students or taught in schools with diverse populations in the city, we assumed these experiences would give them an awareness of the problems facing city schools and their students that “outsiders” could not have. We also assumed that an important aspect of a preparation program for aspiring urban principals should focus on helping participants access this “insider knowledge” for the benefit of the students in the schools that they would lead in the future.

We hypothesized that the women teachers in this large urban school district would: (a) have an intimate understanding of both gender and ethnic discrimination, both through personal experience and observing the experiences of students and their families in the schools in which they taught; (b) use this understanding in the development of a personal approach to school leadership that would promote social justice in the schools they would ultimately lead, and (c) foster the leadership preparation program process of developing empathic leadership by providing opportunities for reflection and self-knowledge. We also speculated that in the process of leadership preparation women participants might well experience the effects of gendered and ethnic stereotypes of leadership that would challenge the development of a personal leadership style.

Through the study, we hoped to discover how women used opportunities for reflection and interaction with peers and faculty in the leadership preparation program to

develop a leadership style and focus, how they reacted to the results of gendered and ethnic stereotypes of women school leaders, and how self image perceived through the lens of gender and ethnicity played into their choice of an initial leadership position. Although critical feminist research has exposed the discrimination that girls in school, and women and ethnic minority women developing careers, experience in education systems (Gardiner, Enomoto, & Grogan, 2000; Young & Skrla, 2003), we believed that the gendered and ethnic experiences that the female program participants brought with them from the urban education system could prove a strength in focusing both their aspirations for themselves and the schools they would ultimately lead.

Related Research

Our questions and propositions were based on understandings drawn from our own observations and experiences of school leadership and from the research literature in a number of related fields. Important among these was research into the process of developing empathic understanding and transforming this into activism, ethnic and gendered stereotyping in organizations and school leadership, gender/ethnic specific leadership preparation programs, and the emerging discourse on school leadership for social justice. A summary of this research and its influence on our approach to the study follows.

The Importance of Self Knowledge

A theme of particular relevance for our study that emerged from this review was the importance of personal awareness gained through a critical assessment of experience, assumptions, and beliefs. The research literature suggests that self knowledge and acceptance of one's own ethnicity, culture, and background are important components of personal convictions, motivation, and awareness of social justice issues. These are attributes of leaders who desire to create schools where moral values, justice, respect, care, and equity are the guiding lights. (Brown, Parham, & Yonker, 1996; York 1994; Banks 1994). Effective leaders extend self knowledge to an understanding of how others perceive and react to them, using this emotional intelligence to adjust their actions for their audience (Goleman, 1995).

Mezirow (1985) notes the importance of critical reflection to gain an understanding of "the historical, cultural and biographical reason for one's need, wants and interests... such self-knowledge is a prerequisite for autonomy in self-directed learning" (p.27). He argues that the process of critical self-reflection requires support and rational discourse with others (Mezirow 1991). Critical reflection forms a cornerstone of adult learning theory (Brookfield, 1995), as does experience and experiential learning (Kolb, 1984). Both Freire (1994) and Beyer (2001), exploring critical reflection within the framework of critical social theory, describe the process of moving beyond self knowledge to activism for social justice.

Female participants in the leadership preparation program would bring a wealth of differing experiences both as women in general and as women belonging to an ethnic group within the urban context. If our program participants were to employ this experience in developing a vision of themselves as school leaders, we hypothesized that they needed opportunities within the preparation program for critical reflection. The internship, peer discussion, and mentoring elements of the program suggested that there would be many opportunities for further experiential learning, critical reflection, and rational discourse. The literature discussed previously posed the question of whether these program elements in themselves would move women participants beyond self-knowledge to activism for social justice—a desired outcome of urban leadership preparation programs.

Leadership Preparation Programs and Social Justice

Leadership preparation programs have come under fire for failing to involve their participants in a quest for solutions to ongoing problems in schools (Murphy, 2006; Levine, 2005; Grogan, 2002). Prospective leaders for urban schools clearly require an understanding of the impact of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and disability on student learning (Bell, 1995; Kose, 2005; Dantley & Tillman, 2005; Ricciardi & Petrosko, 2000; Oliva & Anderson, 2006). Harking back to Foster's (1986) call for school leaders who "develop, challenge, and liberate

human souls" (p.18), current critics of leadership preparation programs call for leaders prepared to be activists for social justice, for example, "individuals who engage in critical analysis of conditions that have perpetuated historical inequities in schools, and who work to change institutional structures and culture" (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005, p 202). McKenzie and Scheurich (2004) urge school leaders to engage in critical discourse and constantly question whether what they are doing is affecting all students or is privileging one group over another. Case studies of urban public school principals demonstrating effective leadership for social justice suggest that selection of participants for urban leadership programs should include an assessment of their understanding and commitment to the cause of social justice (Theoharis, 2005; Williams, 2004).

The question remains, what aspects of the urban leadership preparation program that we were studying would promote the self awareness and harness the experience of gender and ethnicity of the women participants? There is little research regarding how different strategies of component integration "might be more or less conducive to promoting different development objectives" (Smylie & Bennett, 2005, p. 145). Most programs aim to build "individual school leaders' capacities through initial or pre-service preparation, socialization and induction, and opportunities for in-service professional learning and development" (Smylie & Bennett, 2005, p. 138). To do this, programs may use internships in schools, academic course work, regular

cohort meetings, school and conference visits, and workshops (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005; Hess & Kelly, 2005); however, Brown (2004) argues that programs must "carefully craft authentic experiences [that] give students time to think, reflect, assess, decide, and possibly change" (p.78). She advocates for specific strategies that promote critical reflection, rational discourse, and action, including the construction of cultural autobiography, life histories, reflective analysis journals, cross cultural interviews, diversity panels, and the development of an activist action plan by each student. In a similar vein, Henze, Kratz, Norte, Sather, and Walker (2002) call for school leaders to be prepared with the tools and strategies to build positive multi-ethnic communities.

Socialization to Organizational, Gendered and Ethnic Stereotypes of Leadership

Women and minorities have faced discrimination in their movement into leadership as a result of societal and cultural understandings of leadership, the process of socialization into educational organizations, and institutional barriers to women's entry and progress up the leadership ladder (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Brunner, 1999; Crow & Glascock, 1995; Hart, 1995). Preparation and mentoring programs have been accused of transmitting traditional male models of leadership that do not serve women well (Kanter, 1977; Shakeshaft, 1989; Grogan, 1996; Beekley, 1999; Eagly, Johannessen-Schmidt, & Van Engen 2003). Women

aspiring to be urban school leaders lack role models who can sensitize women to the opportunities that exist for them to be change agents within their school communities by leading for social justice (Allen, Jacobson & Lomotey, 1995; Gardiner, Enomoto, & Grogan, 2000). Women and ethnic minority women do not have access to the informal networks that White men use most frequently to transmit the understanding of administrative culture necessary for the successful socialization and induction of aspiring leaders (Miklos, 1983; Banks, 1995).

How would our aspiring principals perceive the process of socialization and mentoring they experienced during their preparation? Would they see this as a transmission of established patterns of leadership or would they be encouraged to develop their own leadership style? They would receive professional mentoring, but would they independently seek role models who would present them with leadership style options?

Gender Sensitive Principal Preparation

While program design, and the use made of the elements included in it, will play an important part in allowing women participants to use their ethnic and gendered knowledge, women face other issues arising from stereotypical and frequently negative understandings of their gendered identity as leaders. There is very little evidence that specific program design has been undertaken for minority women (Rusch, 2004). Equally sparse are examples of leadership programs with components that offer minorities and women an

opportunity to explore the effective employment of their gendered and ethnic experiences and understanding in order to address issues of educational inequality and cultural diversity (Young & Brooks, 2008). This scarcity exists despite widespread concern that these issues remain unaddressed in schools (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Marshall & Parker, 2006).

Design, Methods and Methodology

Riehl and Firestone (2005) noted that the reality of leadership is “at least partly socially constructed—a product of experience and perceptions and a combination of material and subjective conditions [with the researcher’s role] less to describe reality than to elicit actor’s accounts of how they make sense of the world and act on their understanding” (p.159). Mindful of this advice, we adopted a qualitative, phenomenological approach: we anticipated a naturalistic research design which would “emerge, develop, unfold” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 255) over the two-year, two-cohort program.

Year 1

For the first year, we observed the program as designed by the program director in conjunction with the funding organizations who together selected the participants. We examined the program documentation and noted where opportunities for discussion and reflection were built into the design: through meeting with external mentors, spending one day a week with the program director, school district

officials and university faculty, and spending time with the mentoring school principal of the internship school. We established rapport with the participants to whom we had been introduced as researchers and observers with no direct link to program delivery or outcomes.

We interviewed the eight mentors and the six instructors, who delivered the ongoing course work to the cohorts, regarding their perceptions of the importance of a consideration of gender and ethnicity as it impacts leadership preparation. At this point the interview results indicated that instruction would not be differentiated, and that instructors and mentors perceived themselves as having ample opportunity to address individual needs with each participant. In addition, we shadowed all ten Cohort 2 members for one day at the mid-point of the internship in order to gain a better understanding of what they were required to do in the internship, and we observed a number of randomly selected days when the cohort met with the program director to discuss the events of the week. We also read the yearlong "reflection" diaries that participants had been asked to keep during the internship, and other assignments that they were given that might provide insights into their developing understanding of the requirements of leadership in urban schools.

One aspect of program design was particularly germane to our study: the formal leadership preparation programs offered at the university required students to take a semester

course in multicultural and diversity issues. This requirement had been dropped for the Aspiring Urban Leadership Program in the belief that these issues would naturally emerge in unstructured discussion time when participants had the freedom to generate questions and discuss experiences of immediate interest and importance to them. As the end of the first year approached, it was apparent that, despite the many opportunities for reflection and discussion built into the program, these discussions had been used instead for gender and ethnically neutral debates on administrative approaches towards day-to-day problems of management and administration, rather than personal responses to issues of leadership that incorporated diversity.

The apparent explanation for this was that the participants' primary concerns focused on the "culture shock" of the identity change they were making from teacher to administrator. For example, their diaries recorded the resistance encountered from teachers when undertaking the change initiatives with which they had been charged, their concerns about "getting it right" when dealing with the crisis of a student shooting or a drug arrest that had legal implications for the school, and the frustration of trying to find substitute teachers or dealing with abusive parents. Coping, not critical analysis was the order of the day, and if the participants did use gender and ethnic experience and understanding in their responses to day-to-day problems, they appeared to be doing this unconsciously. But while this resulted in

our initial expectations for the study being at odds with the reality of participant experiences, we chose to continue to observe, rather than request a redirection of procedures, for the first year of the study.

However, one incident suggested to us was that the groups mentoring the students did so from the stance of downplaying ethnic and gender aspects of urban schooling—that there were implicit understandings amongst those mentoring the participants that these issues should be avoided rather than confronted. A presentation by ethnic minority guest presenters from the school district on the topic of multiculturalism had been followed by a question from a participant asking the presenters to reflect on the role that ethnicity had played during their careers in education. The guests affirmed the existence of ethnicity-related difficulties, but refrained from going into details out of “respect for others in the room.” The program director, in a later interview, confirmed that some issues like gender and ethnicity appeared to be “elephants in the room.” Just as Young (2003) had found gender was a “non or invisible issue” (p.284) in her study of a school leader shortage in Iowa, we surmised that discussions of social justice issues were unlikely to take place within the program unless purposely initiated.

Year 2

We hypothesized that deliberate sensitization of program participants to issues of gender and ethnicity would need to take place before the participants would reflect on these

issues and analyze their own experiences from a gendered and ethnic viewpoint. Such sensitization or awareness building would be an intervention in the program that could affect the outcomes and would allow for a comparison between the two cohorts to inform future program design. We approached the program director with our suggestions for the second year of the program.

The program director agreed to incorporate exercises that included the mapping of participant’s personal journeys to the leadership program and the part played by pre-program mentors and role models in that journey, the sharing of personal experiences of urban schooling, group discussions based on readings that included biographies of successful minority and women principals, practitioner articles concerning best practice for minority students and ethnic community relations, and discussions of race and gender issues that could arise with students, teaching staff, and the parent community during the internship. In addition, participants were specifically asked to note in their diaries issues they encountered relating to gender and ethnicity; for example, how gender and ethnicity operated for themselves, the teachers, and administrators in the school where they were interns and how administrators at these schools incorporated gender and ethnic awareness when structuring successful school experiences for all their students. In our role as researchers, we were given access to the written material produced by participants for the program, providing us with further

insights regarding their perceptions and priorities.

Time was allocated towards the end of the second year, when participants were in the process of interviewing for their first administrative position, for a morning of focus-group discussions. The discussions were conducted with three single-sex but mixed ethnicity groups (4-5 participants in each group, for 45 minutes duration), and then with one group containing all the participants, both men and women (one hour duration). These used a semi-structured interview schedule focusing on experiences both in school and in the first interviews participants had attended. The prompts encouraged participants to talk about the mentoring experience and their administrative employment interviews to date.

Additionally, we conducted semi-structured interviews with all the female participants in both Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 in the final month of their respective programs. Interview prompts asked participants to reflect on those aspects of the preparation program experiences that had proved most useful to them, including exposure to leadership style. Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researchers and individual interviews were followed up with email or phone questions to clarify statements and elaborate on viewpoints that emerged from the transcribed data.

The two researchers, one a fluent Spanish speaker, conducted all the research, data recording, and transcribing. As White women with previous experience leading schools in

diverse cultural settings, we recognized our own sensitization to issues of gender, ethnicity, and leadership. We appreciated that our own experience provided us with a useful resource to draw on as we approached the research and interpreted the data. However, we were also aware that this same experience could color our interpretation of that data, and that we were very much "outsiders" in the context of urban education. We sought the advice of ethnic minority colleagues and those with experience of urban schooling to confirm our interpretation of incidents and events described by participants. We understood that participants could feel constrained in what they chose to share given their novice status in a politicized school district, but were pleasantly surprised by their apparent openness in discussing their experiences.

Analysis of the Data

Our analysis of the data employed recognized qualitative research procedures (Patton, 2002). Transcribed interviews, participants' diaries, reflective essays, and researcher notes of observations of discussion sessions and shadowing were read by both researchers independently (to increase credibility with regard to interpretation) in an ongoing process over the two years of the study to draw out data that had direct relevance to our research question. We have already noted how an examination of data (or lack of it) was used to modify program content during the second year. At the end of Year 2, data collected was

initially sorted into organizational categories (Maxwell, 2005; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001) linked to the components of our conceptual model—self knowledge/critical reflection, leadership styles/models, stereotyping, leading in multicultural communities for social justice—those areas where participants’ gendered and ethnic self awareness influenced their understanding or reaction to their learning and experiences in the preparation program.

Through examination of the data in each organizational category, we identified connected or related data that provided insights about commonalities or differences in the experiences of the women, which was then grouped with supporting contextual information. For the purposes of this study, we selected substantive categories to which five or more of the 15 women participants contributed reflective comments, and where interviews from mentors and others involved in the program presented additional insights. These categories were: (a) critical reflections on learning to lead—Are we learning to lead the traditional way?; (b) ethnic and gender stereotyping in school leadership—How am I seen as a leader?; (c) leading in ethnically diverse situations—How do I accommodate/relate to multi-ethnic school communities?; (d) best fit first leadership position choices—Where can I best employ my experience and understanding?, and (e) leading for social justice—How do I lead to improve the school experience for all students? We present and explore these categories and associated questions in

the following sections. Where we have quoted directly from the data, we have used the following abbreviations: A (African American), H (Hispanic), W (White), M (Male), and F (Female).

Are we learning to lead the traditional way?

Our review of the interview data collected from 6 mentors during the first year of the program from Cohort 1 (teachers recommended by district administrators) was notable for the virtual absence of any acknowledgement of issues of either gender or ethnicity. The mentors—the principals of the schools in which participants were doing their year-long internship—were asked directly if they considered whether issues of gender and ethnicity played into either the mentoring experience or the leadership style they themselves had developed. They denied any effects, instead focusing on school mission and professionalism as key factors in successful leadership in an urban setting. Examples of responses to these questions were, “I think a successful school administrator is focused on the mission of the school—the outcomes for the students—and as long as this is always the guiding light, there is room for lots of different leadership approaches” (WM), while a WF mentor answered, “We are in the business of serving kids and I don’t think [gender and ethnicity] make any difference at all.” An AF mentor stated forcefully, “I want to see [g]umption. I don’t care what color you are. I want [g]umption. I’m going up to White folk with [g]umption,” explaining that moving

beyond gender and ethnicity and getting everyone in the community to work together effectively was the most important focus for a successful leader.

We were curious to know whether the women participants used a gendered perspective (asking themselves whether what they observed/were taught would work for them, as women) when observing the patterns of leadership that operated in their internship schools. When the women participants were asked whether they believed school administration was still male dominated to the extent that the structures and policies of the school district, the acceptable leadership styles, and established peer networking amongst administrators in the school district reflected several generations of male leadership, all of the women in Cohort 2 agreed that this was so. One WF had no doubts:

Does gender make a difference?
Oh, sure! Talking about my school, it's really male dominated—the number of times I've sat in on administrative meetings and said something and the male principal says "mmm, ...," then a male administrator says the same thing and the principal says, "That's a really good idea" and I think, "Hey, wait a minute, that was my idea!"
An AF noted that she had observed that her AF principal, with long years of experience in the school system and who spoke fluent Spanish, always appeared uncomfortable and insecure

when she was dealing with White male superiors in the school system; however, there was a clear sense that things were changing. A WF stated, "I think the day of the White male dominating high schools is shifting; they are looking pretty grey now."

However, none of the women agreed with the suggestion that they were being socialized to a certain leadership style. One woman stated, "When I first went in, the principal/mentor [WM] said, 'There are things I do well, and things I don't do well. I want you to take from me the things that will be helpful to you.'" Diary entries, records of meetings the participants had attended, discussions they had sat in on, and experiences with school district officials, all indicated the women were cognizant and critical of the examples of leadership to which they were exposed during the year-long internship. An example from the diary entry of a HF describing a meeting held for school principals by the regional director stated the following:

The leadership style of the regional director was authoritative. How does he ever expect to gain the respect of his principals? What incentives do the principals have to go above and beyond? He was demoralizing, and I know that I will do my best to never treat anyone in that manner.

When both the mentors and female participants were asked about comfort levels in cross-gender, cross-ethnic pairings with mentors, there was a similar dismissal of the issue as unimportant. A WM mentor noted, "I don't consider gender/ethnicity an issue. I've worked for Latina women, and I have Black and Latina women working for me. It's professionalism that's important." In a focus group discussion, WF and AF participants concurred with a WF colleague who stated: "a good mentor is a good mentor, regardless of gender or ethnicity."

However, several women participants in Cohort 2 noted the different relationship that existed with a woman mentor. A focus group conversation went as follows:

I sat down with my mentor [female]—we would talk shop, family, shoes ...'[AF]. 'I think my mentor [WM] was also like that, but he came from a family with five sisters' [WF]. 'It wasn't that kind of time with my mentor [WM], like, you say, woman talk. However, there was a [woman] assistant principal I had a relationship with who I could talk to like that—but my principal was always available [AF].

One WF participant noted the clearly paternalistic nature of her relationship with her WM mentor. "He is looking after me. He treats me differently than he would a male intern I'm sure. He's very protective," noting his reluctance

to leave her alone in potentially confrontational situations with parents or teachers. An AF mentor thought having a male mentee would be different, "you know that bonding thing [between women]," but went on to note that contrary to this assumption, the relationship built with her mentee was not hindered. A WF commented:

Women often search out other women. The relationship I've formed with Dr. A. [her principal mentor, a WM] is primarily one of teacher/student. I see that he takes everything that occurs throughout the day as a learning opportunity for me. But one of the assistant principals has been instrumental in my growth at the school. I value her judgment and often talk with her about the "why" of her decisions.

This participant's reference to multiple and self-selected mentors reflected the results found in the mapping exercise conducted by Cohort 2 where the female participants' were asked to cite the important people and events in their leadership journey. All eight women in this cohort cited a combination of female relatives, teachers, and colleagues from their own ethnic communities as people whose example and support encouraged them to apply to the leadership preparation program.

Taken overall, data relating to mentorship for leadership suggests that the women participants did not perceive as important the gender and ethnicity of the professional mentors assigned to them. The participants critically viewed

practical lessons about successful leadership using their understanding of their own ethnic and gender identity. These lessons were provided by their professional mentors including the retired school leaders who gave them informal advice, the principals who provided on-the-job direction, and the program director through weekly meetings. When women required confirmation of their gendered status and competency after testing incidents in the internship that they did not choose to discuss with their principal or professional mentor, they sought their own mentors with whom they could relate on a more personal and emotional level, frequently situated outside of their professional environment and sharing a gendered and/or ethnic perspective.

How am I seen as a leader?

All the participants were very aware that their first administrative position following the preparation program was likely to be that of assistant principal, and they were aware of the need to make this a successful experience in order to transition to principal. The assistant principal position has traditionally been connected with the stereotype of the male disciplinarian (Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Daresh, 2004)—a position frequently requiring contact with parents in often highly emotional situations. In the focus group discussion with all the participants in Cohort 2, including the three male participants, there was a general sense that stereotypes connected with both gender and ethnicity played against women,

and only partly to the advantage of men. One AM being courted by a number of “problem schools” complained that, despite his excellent record as a mathematics teacher and strong data processing and statistics skills, all the schools saw was “six-foot-four and Black,” in other words, someone to sort out fights in the cafeteria.

Several women participants recounted incidents during the internships where they had been made aware of similar perceptions by members of the school community. A WF participant wrote, “I was yelled at by a male parent. [I asked myself] would this father have acted this way in front of a male principal?” An HF described an incident with a father raising his children alone. “He had no time for women—when he came up to the school he would either flirt or go to the other extreme and degrade the female administrators—but he was just fine with the male school police officer.” An AF described a heated argument that she had been involved in with two African-American parents, which had immediately ceased when the White male assistant principal appeared in the room. She noted ruefully, “Some things [the acknowledgement of White male leadership/power] just don’t change.” An AF’s diary entry described a similar disagreement with two African-American parents:

When they come up to the school, and see you are not 70 years old and wearing glasses, they don’t know what to do—they assume you are an Oreo [a denigrating

term referring to African Americans who have accepted the dominant White culture as their own] or just nasty for dealing with their kids the same way as all the others. Their attitude was “we are all African Americans—you should give our kids a break.”

An HF noted the strategy adopted by a WF principal in a school with a large Hispanic population, where male teachers and administrators were “much more respected than women by the Latino community—so when push came to shove and someone was really needed to put their foot down—the male assistant-principal would be sent out to tell people ‘that is how it is’.”

A similar interplay of gender and ethnicity was noted as affecting some dealings with teachers. A HF noted a case of a WM teacher being evaluated by a HF and it was seen by the teacher as a personal vendetta based on gender and ethnicity. Another woman noted, “I watched an AF evaluating a WM teacher, and he was being very profane, and do I think he would have been the same with an AM administrator?—no I don’t! I think in certain situations with staff ethnicity and gender can be a factor.”

For the women participants in the study, these incidents left them ambiguous as to the image they should project as school leaders. An HF mused,

By my nature I’m nurturing, and wonder if this will be perceived as weakness. Coming in as a male, you have an advantage—

people don’t want to mess with you because you are a man. As a woman, you’ve got to really prove yourself.

Another noted the case of an AF principal she respected highly, who had a very tough personality, but who had worked hard at projecting a nurturing image because that was what was expected and allowed her to be accepted and successful. She concluded, “You have to be strong, but I don’t think there is any problem with showing compassion and caring.” An AM thought women were placed in a difficult situation, as in many cultural settings the toughness needed (as when taking proactive or controversial action) is seen as incompatible with the nurturing role women are supposed to play. He observed, “The ‘tough love’ image takes some building up.”

In summary, the intertwined understandings of ethnic and gender stereotypes of women as leaders shape the observations of participants regarding their treatment in certain situations but also present them with difficult dilemmas. Should they conform to these stereotypes to make members of the school community more comfortable with their leadership, despite this public image being at odds with their self image? Is it possible to do this when there are, within the school community, multiple ethnic groups with very different stereotypes of women in leadership? Or can women establish a very personal style or attitude to leadership that projects their gendered and ethnic selves and expect acceptance?

How do I accommodate/lead in multi-ethnic communities?

While mentors denied any direct effect of ethnicity on their leadership, both mentors and participants alluded to important coping mechanisms that principals employed in situations where the dominant ethnic community in the school was not that of the principal. One AM offered the view that to successfully lead a school of a different dominant ethnicity “the principal must demonstrate he or she is culture and color blind, have a track record of working successfully with the dominant ethnic community, and be an active participant in the community.” A WM mentor/principal, a fluent Spanish speaker leading a predominantly Hispanic school, expressed the following opinion:

A principal must have rapport with the community the school serves—in my case using Spanish has been very important, being out in the neighborhood, involved in community activities. I don’t think you have to be Black or Latino, but I do have to be empathic to the community, to work at being accepted.

Several women noted how their principal/mentors carefully selected office staff to compensate for their own lack of knowledge of the language or the culture of groups in the school. Some described how principals regularly called on members of the teaching faculty of a particular ethnicity to be the point-person for particular community groups.

The perceived importance of understanding the language of ethnic communities, both formal and informal, was noted by a number of the women participants. A HF noted, “I thought my ethnicity played a big part [in a successful internship]—a language issue. Speaking the language lowered the barriers. People appreciated being able to talk in Spanish, and I could communicate with them.” She recounted how she had been able to sort out problems for two [recently immigrated Hispanic] families, because of the combination of language and leadership status. “Not being able to speak to parents in their own language is a big disadvantage, or to speak to [non-teaching] staff in the schools—that’s alienating and ostracizing,” stated an AF. “Language is important—parents appreciate it when even teachers make the effort to have a little language” (HF).

Ethnically diverse school communities offer reflective school leaders opportunities to employ the understanding gained from their own gendered and ethnic experiences to the benefit of the whole school community. Additionally, specific knowledge of ethnic expectations and language can be used to enhance communications with groups within the school community. The participants’ observations suggested they appreciated the need to be sensitive to the challenges of effective communication with, and the particular needs of, all groups within an ethnically diverse school community. They recognized that success in these situations could require sharing leadership and communication

responsibilities within multi-ethnic administrative teams.

Where can I best employ my experience and understanding?

The discussion around language skills and specific ethnic understanding was closely connected with the theme of being a leader within one's "own" ethnic community, clearly an issue to which the women had given some thought as they went for the first round of interviews for leadership positions. An HF was being considered for a dominantly Hispanic school and mused, "I was raised in that neighborhood, I could go out without feeling scared. This was a big advantage." One AF recounted her interview experiences:

I went to two job interviews last week—one in a solidly Afro-American school and community with an AM principal. The other in a more diversified school district, White woman head, with White and 50% Latino students, as well as African Americans. She [the interviewing principal] was interested in me because of the diversity issue—someone to identify with the Black population. I don't know if that's what I want to do. [Hispanic] parents are going to come in with a whole set of understanding and language that I just don't understand. I know my area. I know my people. It's a definite strength if your constituents identify with you—[it] gets you five steps ahead instead of

having to work harder to establish yourself!

An HF observed, "There are dynamics going on all the time both directly and indirectly. As a teacher, I know that I am not going to understand the dynamics going on between the African-American students." An AF participant said she would opt for a position in a predominantly African-American dominant school if she was offered one: "I think I would prefer a predominantly African-American school. When people see you are the same as they are, they tend to open up more—you feel more comfortable. I feel that way as a parent sometimes."

The issue of hiring for diversity was also one that came up frequently in discussions. One woman participant interviewing for an assistant principal position had been told by the interviewing principal, an AF, "I'm looking for a White male assistant principal. Much as I know we are working well together, I don't know if I can have an all African-American administrative team. It's the diversity issue." Participants appreciated that there was no clear right or wrong here, even when it disadvantaged them. "I think diversity in the administrative team is important—for students and staff to feel there are role models. People who can understand the cultural differences that might be either real or perceived. It can be a definite advantage" (WF). Another woman (AF) noted,

Yes and no. It is important for the administration to reflect the

student body. The kids need to see, you know, if you are in an African-African school and they need to share experiences and that's important and that doesn't necessarily mean you can't have a White person in there who can be an advocate and be successful with the school. [But] do I think there are different dynamics working there? Yes, absolutely.

A match with gender and ethnicity was clearly an issue the women in both Cohort 1 and 2 considered as they sought positions in the school district. Their comments suggest that the schools considering hiring them would also take gender and ethnicity into consideration, but often for very different reasons (the appearance of diversity on the administrative team, the need for someone to act as a role model for specific groups of students) and these reasons would affect the role that they would be expected and enabled to play in the school community. When the aspiring principals were offered a choice of leadership positions in different school settings, this was a dilemma not easily resolved.

How do I lead for social justice?

The discussion with participants was not solely focused on how gender and ethnicity affected their own personal development. We wanted to know whether the aspiring principals would apply their own understandings of inequality to their consideration of how social justice in urban schools is linked to leadership. Data from the women in Cohort 1 were noticeably

focused on learning school management skills. One woman observed she was becoming "queen of the template" for school correspondence. Perhaps this was a reflection of the selection process. Cohort 1 had been approached to join the program; Cohort 2 went through competitive selection that had brought women into the program who had not necessarily positioned themselves to be principals or assistant principals. Women in Cohort 2, who had been sensitized by readings and discussions of the particular problems of ethnic groups and gender issues among students, had clearly given the issue more thought.

Examination of reflective essays from both cohorts written in response to prompts provided by the program leader indicated that four participants came into the program with a clear mission to improve conditions in the schools. An HF wrote:

The check-in question, "What do you hope to get out of this program?" was a reflective piece for me. What I want most is to make a change in the Hispanic community. I want to empower the students and parents so that they may make positive changes in their lives and surroundings [...] The drop out rate for Latino boys is among the highest in the city. There is no Head Start program [...] There are no major industries or corporations that can help fund and support our schools financially. The social service agencies and mental health agencies are overwhelmed

and have let our children down. I hope one day I may be given the opportunity to work as a principal in the Latino community. I just might make a difference.

Another WF wrote:

As a strong advocate for ELL [English Language Learners] learners, I often see these groups of students isolated physically in schools as well as unaddressed within the school curricula. With the rise of immigration and second language learners in schools, this issue will only grow wider. I hope to become a change agent in my future position. Further... I have always believed that there is an amount of activism that is included in our positions in education.

This woman's statement was noteworthy in transcending issues of ethnicity and gender to encompass the bigger issue of immigrant communities and demonstrated both empathy and an understanding of the potential of leadership to bring about change.

Diaries kept by the women in Cohort 2 during the internship contained descriptions of incidents that affected them and led them to reflect on social justice issues. One described the furor that had erupted in a school around a WW II project that had student work containing swastikas displayed on the classroom wall. The intern noted,

I found this situation to be extremely interesting. Particularly because it gave me an insight into how people think about discrimination and oppression. She [the history teacher] was only seeing these symbols in the past... I thought about how the principal would address this for a long time, and compared what I would have said to the teacher, with what the principal actually said.

Another woman described sitting in on a disciplinary incident involving a White boy who had brought a plastic gun to school—an incident that she described as silly rather than serious. She noted that the boy was not allowed back into the school, even though reinstatement was the usual practice after the disciplinary hearing had taken place. When she asked why this was, the principal said it was because the boy was White, and allowing him to come back “would open a can of worms that he [the principal] did not want to get into.” The participant noted ruefully “all decisions are not as simple as they appear on the surface. As principal, your decisions are far reaching and really do affect the future.”

The following incident, recounted by a WF participant in a focus group discussion, provoked considerable debate over questions of “professional behavior” versus “making things better”:

I had a situation where I was talking to an African-American male student about an incident in

the classroom with a WF teacher. He came down to talk to me (an administrator) because he had been alienated in the classroom and claimed it was race. What I was thinking was I would have liked to have talked to him about race in general, what it was like to be a Black kid in the school, how he got on with the White kids and teachers, but I didn't—partly because of wanting to be professional, partly because of being a White woman—but I really wanted him to question the situation, talk about what he was feeling, maybe because he didn't know how to articulate it, and maybe because I was White too. I didn't want to stir something up, but I was thinking to myself, "If I was an African-American woman, would I have gone there?" (I know this teacher has a history of this sort of behavior [confrontations with students of color].) Would I have been able to ask him more directly if he thought what was happening was because he was African American?

An HF added a description of an incident she had witnessed in the bilingual school where she was undertaking her internship that reinforced the complicated issues confronting principals. She was in a bilingual school which required all teachers to speak Spanish. She noted,

This got really ugly racially between the Hispanics and

African-American teachers, but anyone could have taken the test. If you were White or Black and spoke Spanish you could stay. It was just about being bilingual, not race, about the needs being served in the schools.

An AF noted in her diary, "I have been thinking a lot about issues of race recently," and went on to recount an incident she had observed during the internship involving two African-American girls giving a new WF teacher a difficult time in the classroom:

Inevitably, I do think race is involved. Most of the time racial dynamics play a part in the classroom, but I feel that it plays more of a part in the way we respond to students. In other words, Ms. M. (the new teacher) may not realize that the way she responds to these girls is not working due to cultural dynamics. Yet Ms. M. also worked at G (a predominantly African-American school) and has only taught African-American high school students. It's so complicated!

Other comments indicating an awareness of the need to lead for social justice came from two women who had visited a school with a diverse population for an Honor Roll ceremony. "There were two Blacks out of the thirty kids on the roll and I thought to myself, why only two? Well, that conversation has to happen in the school. How do we get more of the Black kids on the honor

roll?" Her companion added, "I noticed this too, and there were only a handful of African-American teachers—five—why? These kids need role models." The need to have "conversations" was clearly in the minds of the majority of participants: "It's a very touchy subject in the schools," and, "If I were the principal there, I would be bringing in assemblies about race, ethnicity. These are unaddressed for the most part at school, yet we are pretty diverse."

Taken together, these incidents suggest a growing awareness on the part of the women in Cohort 2: to analyze incidents involving the treatment of students through a social justice lens. They also point to the need to provide opportunities in leadership preparation programs to discuss effective ways of initiating the "conversations" with the school community around social justice that participants clearly believed were necessary.

Discussion

Reviewing the two years of collected data from the two cohorts of women in the aspiring urban principal's preparation program, issues of gender and ethnicity are clearly there, though not where we had initially expected them. At a personal level, the women's ability to move beyond merely gathering management and district operations skills to seeing themselves as school leaders for social justice appeared to depend in part on their previous experience and in part on the pedagogy employed in the program. The women in Cohort 1, selected for

their leadership potential, appeared insecure with their new roles and found themselves with little time to move away from learning survival, coping, and management skills to linking leadership and social justice.

While the first year of the program presented opportunities for reflection and discussion, these were undirected and came to focus on the day to day learning and skills rather than the exploration needed for critical self awareness. Where such activities did take place, they were gender neutral. Taking an inventory of leadership competencies resulted in their understanding about leadership competencies but did not promote discussion about gender differences in leadership. Mentors (including an AF mentor) were reluctant to acknowledge any differences in the treatment or perceptions of school administrators by school communities as a result of the administrators' gender or ethnicity.

Differences between the two cohorts in respect of awareness of social justice issues were marked. The women in Cohort 2 had applied for inclusion, rather than been nominated, as had been the case for Cohort 1. They had leadership experiences at the teacher and lower administrative levels of the school, which had predisposed their selection for the program. These experiences appeared to make the participants more confident of their leadership abilities and had given them a strong commitment to leading for change if the tone and content of their applications to the program and subsequent diary entries are any indication. The women in Cohort 2 were

able to articulate the complexity of issues of social justice that they observed in the schools on a day-to-day basis, and of their own gendered and ethnic identity in relation to leadership in these schools. It is not clear whether this was the result of their greater confidence with regard to mastering administrative and management techniques that allowed them more time for focused thought and observation or of the sensitizing activities aimed at promoting critical self reflection and awareness, rational discourse, and directed observation of their school situations that were included in the second year program; however, participants in this cohort were more critical of their mentor's and instructor's styles of leadership, and more reflective on the social justice problems they encountered during their internship in the urban schools.

Women participants were aware of the model of White male hierarchical leadership (Shakeshaft, 1989) traditionally found in urban school districts, and did not feel they were being pressured to adopt it; however, they did wrestle with the issue of what leadership image they should project. They were, in a sense, caught in a damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't situation. To cultivate a caring, nurturing image was to fit a gendered stereotype of women, but to appear efficient, politically savvy, and hard-nosed was to buy in to a traditional male leadership stereotype. For example, in one focus group discussion, all the women agreed with their fellow participant who noted the need to put on some sort of mask while in the

administrator role, and commented they would be more comfortable if they did not have to do this. Men in the group noted the reverse problem in that it was hard to come across as caring and nurturing, especially in high schools with several thousand students. Both men and women understood that their first leadership position could well be as an assistant principal, a position connected with a disciplinarian image which further compounded the problem of image for women. Opportunities to air these concerns in the safety of cohort meetings were valued by both men and women.

Discussions about the optimum first leadership post were linked to concerns about how to develop good community relations when not of the same ethnicity as the dominant group within the school. Here the views of the White women were of particular interest in that they did not have the option of leadership of schools of their own ethnic group (there were no predominantly White schools in the city), an option available to the African-American and Hispanic women. The White women's experience in schools where they were members of a minority ethnic group predisposed them towards schools with diversity both in students and teachers, and gave them the confidence to think they could lead schools of any one ethnic group. The women who had been less exposed to diversity, for example African-American women who had been schooled and had taught in predominantly African-American schools, showed less confidence about leading diverse schools or schools of predominantly different ethnicity. They

showed a clear preference for a first leadership position in a school of their own ethnicity believing this would contribute to a successful experience. Clearly, using the internship to give exposure to school situations not previously experienced would help to build the confidence of aspiring principals about leading in cultures not their own.

The addition of activities designed to raise awareness of ethnicity and gender as issues within the framework of leadership training for Cohort 2 did promote meaningful dialogue among participants and led to a request from them for advice and training on how to lead a similar dialogue in schools. The sensitization allowed participants to reflect on what they had seen and experienced, but they clearly felt more was needed. In this respect, the program participants echoed Theoharis (2005) when he expressed the need for "...developing language to speak, confront, and dialogue about race as it is embedded into the fabric of schools" (p. 23).

Recommendations

The research findings suggest the following four recommendations for future urban leadership training programs. We are mindful that these recommendations are drawn from the experiences of women participants in our study and may or may not be relevant to men aspiring to be principals. While men may have a gendered and ethnic experience of leadership, it will inevitably be different from that experienced by women for the present, because of traditional cultural understandings.

In regards to the first recommendation, based on the differences in awareness and sensitivity to social justice issues exhibited by women in Cohort 1 and Cohort 2, there would seem to be a strong argument for selecting participants for urban leadership preparation programs from those who combine demonstrated leadership potential with a clear social justice mission stemming from their own ethnic/gendered experiences in urban schools. Candidates for urban principal preparation programs should be asked to articulate this mission in their initial applications. References should read, as at least one did in this study, "Ms A's commitment to education is evident in her continual support of equity, diversity, and multiculturalism. She is a sensitive and caring educator whose primary concern is the enhancement of all her children. Her Spanish/English proficiency is a true asset."

In regards to the second recommendation, program design and delivery needs to be centered on the provision of opportunities for critical self reflection leading to self awareness, particularly the complexities of ethnic, gendered, leadership persona. Aspiring women urban principals need opportunities to discuss how to model an image of leadership for their students and school communities that encompasses caring, nurturing, good organization, creativity, and wide thinking— one that replaces existing male/female stereotypes of leadership. The results from our interviews and focus group discussions suggest that women participants need "safe"

opportunities to have these discussions with women cognizant of gendered/ethnic stereotypes of leadership, as well as in the regular co-educational classroom situation. Ensuring a gender and ethnic balance among those selected for urban leadership training programs at both elementary and high school levels will avoid the development of new stereotypes and the potential feminization or masculinization of school leadership.

In regards to the third recommendation, comments by the women in our study regarding best-fit positions indicated their need to build confidence that they could lead different ethnic groups in diverse settings. Roza, Celio, Harvey and Wishon (2003) note that principals who were the same race or ethnicity as the largest proportion of the student populations were more likely to remain in the position for a longer period of time, indicating either best fit or lack of confidence in moving to other situations. While this lack of confidence may not be limited to women, it does suggest that program design and delivery should include opportunities for experiential learning including the exposure of urban leadership trainees to schools that differ ethnically from those with which they are familiar, be it in the composition of the teaching staff or the student body. For example, women aspiring to principalships in multiethnic schools must contend with multiple stereotypes. Our study suggested they would appreciate opportunities to experience these situations or simulations of them to develop coping strategies and self

confidence before making the choice of leadership positions.

Finally, in regards to the fourth recommendation, the reflections of women in this study regarding how to lead for social justice suggest the need for opportunity for aspiring leaders to practice opening dialogues with teachers, students, and community about social justice issues in schools where such dialogues have been absent. How these dialogues are conducted may well reflect both the gender and ethnicity of the participants. Practice in developing action plans and strategies for building multi-cultural communities should be provided. The weekly meetings in our study preparation program could have provided a forum for participants to develop and analyze such plans and strategies drawing on each others' gendered and ethnic experiences.

We conclude with a quotation from one of the women aspiring to lead a school in the demanding and complex school system served by the leadership preparation program examined in our study:

Conversations about race and ethnicity are hard conversations and are complicated. As a woman, to be taught how to begin this conversation in the school with the faculty would be helpful. It's a slow process I'm sure, but how you enter this conversation in this school is important. There will always be these dynamics, and I think part of the problem is that they are never talked about.

Urban leadership preparation programs can clearly play an important role in allowing difficult conversations about gender and ethnicity to surface by providing sensitization to issues and creating safe spaces in which these conversations can take place. This study, despite the limitations of scope and scale, indicates new directions for

ongoing dialogue about relevant content for leadership preparation programs and specifically for women and minority women aspiring to the challenge of urban school leadership.

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