

CAPSTONE PAPER: Culturally Relevant School Leadership

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The role of a school leader is terrifying and challenging. The responsibility is grand and must not be entered into lightly or without the depth of consideration. In the School District of Philadelphia, which services a diverse population, it is essential that as a leader, culturally relevant community development is at the forefront of all that school leaders hope to enact and achieve; this is no easy task. Cultural relevance requires an extensive list of qualities, abilities, and reflection as one enters into a future as a culturally relevant leader. There must be a commitment to relationship building. Knowing and listening to team members is key to moving forward in unity. A school leader must build a diverse group of community members and commit to their development as facilitators of culturally relevant learning. Cultural relevance can only be achieved when diverse voices speak and reflect on their experience and how communities can better represent their members. This will come as a result of equitable communication and clarity from leadership. If the leadership team and community recognize a school leader's commitment to honest engagement, they will know that this is not a choice but a requirement. As relationships are molded and communication begins, the collaboration will evolve, and as a diverse community begins to listen and grow together, challenges will be brought to the surface, and transformation is inevitable. Which becomes a pivotal moment when people must ask themselves if they are ready to do the work or not and if not, then it will become more difficult for them to live within a constant place of tension, and they will either remove themselves or find a new pool in which to swim. This is never the desired outcome, but naivety would reign if it failed to be addressed. The aim is never perfection in a school community. The objective is to fail together, question, and grow towards something better for everyone, not just those who hold the majority power and privilege. The work begins on the margins and works its way inward.

There is nowhere to go unless self-reflection guides practice as a culturally relevant leader. Bonner states it well when he says, "...becoming a more culturally responsive teacher takes time,

patience, effort, and an unwavering commitment. It requires a foundational shift in the approach to teaching and cannot be accomplished by simply adjusting lessons with shifting foundational operational beliefs (14)." Here he addresses classroom instruction, but the same is true for those who lead and desire others to follow. This transformation does not come in an easy ten-step program. It takes time, patience, and commitment. All members within a learning community "...must continually reflect on their own beliefs and biases to become more culturally conscious and committed to supporting marginalized, diverse students. Subsequently, they will commit to becoming culturally competent and responsive. From being culturally unconscious to cultural consciousness and then to cultural responsiveness, the path is discovered through reflection and inquiry (Gordon, 2)." Coaching teachers and staff towards this work is to bring them to a place where they begin to practice racial assertiveness in their classrooms and within the school community. Educational leaders work to develop racial literacy for teachers, parents, and students by describing teaching and training processes and activities and communicating expected outcomes. Students, parents, and teachers must mobilize to demand equitability within schools. If teachers, school leaders, or politicians refuse to agree on navigating thorny racial dilemmas that lead to unconscionable racial disparity, they should be held to account. In his book *Promoting Racial Literacy in Schools: Differences That Make a Difference*, Howard Stevenson states, "Educational leaders cannot make stump speeches at bully pulpits about racial equality and progress and yet allow fear to paralyze them to avoid addressing racial conflicts in their schools. They can't avoid resolving racial conflicts, produce students who remain uncertain how to resolve racial conflicts, and still claim to be ethical educational leaders. Educators, counselors, politicians, and parents can't have it both ways (185)." Fighting for culturally relevant, transformative learning environments will take more than the words we speak and the ideas we communicate; it must be felt and observed through actions and behaviors. He goes on to say, "Integrating racial literacy into school curricula can be a challenge of leadership in that this work often feels like taking one step forward and two steps backward. The

resistance is high, and the progress is small (200)." He recognizes here the lack of racial literacy within the school curriculum. The lack of representation and professional development of teachers to effectively and adequately integrate racial literacy into the classroom learning is minimal, if at all, and this is just one example that reveals how the commitment to equitable schools will not happen overnight; it is a lifelong journey towards truth and justice for ALL.

The commitment to coaching and mentoring others through their reflective practice is founded on how well school leaders can build and cultivate relationships. Leaders need to provide a sense of safety and belonging in schools by building authentic relationships with teachers. Teachers need to feel safe and that they belong. Leaders must ask themselves, how well can we get to know our teachers within professional and personal boundaries, and how do we model self-reflective and culturally relevant leadership to emulate? Wormelli expresses that "people feel connected to those they perceive as understanding them. To inhabit another, however, we must inhibit ourselves-subordinating our knowledge and perspectives for a moment and embracing the other's world. This takes practice (14)." Through transparency and honesty, others will know they are seen and heard. This is pivotal in understanding that one is called to serve and lead towards personal and professional growth and development. Through building trust, relationships can flourish, and partnerships can be forged. Teachers must be engaged in collaborative and elevated conversations where they are treated as professionals and specialists in their field of practice. A practice that is helpful in intentional relationship building is the method of "Relationship Mapping." This method is discussed as a tool for approaching students' relationships but can also be highly effective in guiding school leaders towards engaging with their staff. It is followed in three steps:

"Step 1: Mapping - In advance of the whole group meeting, post a list of students (teachers) where only adult staff will see and have the team identify with stickers students (teachers) they have a positive relationship with (yellow) and students (teachers) they believe to be at-risk (red).

Step 2: Reflective meeting - Staff (Leadership Team) meet as a whole group to reflect on the relationship map and create action plans for identified students (teachers).

Step 3: Follow-Up - 1st follow-up happens four weeks after the initial meeting, 2nd follow-up happens 6-8 weeks after initial meeting - staff (Leadership Team) who committed to action plan report on status and progress (Making, 1)"

When building relationships with staff, it can be challenging to do with fidelity; there is no harm in having a more systemic plan in place to be sure that school leaders are not just gravitating towards those who are easier for them to engage with and that all are being heard and seen within the learning community. This also ensures that marginalized people within the staff culture are represented and heard. Another way to ensure this is to commit to culturally relevant hiring practices. Staff diversity is key to moving towards an equitable learning community. Building a diverse team and hiring those committed to a shared mission/vision will enable a school to thrive.

Considering who is "on the bus" and who is not, leaders must consider one's unique cultural background. Developing a diverse team in their experience and understanding of the world they inhabit is essential in a learning community. Once this team is established, their development as culturally relevant professionals is a primary consideration. Khalifa recognizes that "It must be understood that policy *alone* cannot address exclusionary practices of educators. It must be accompanied by critical self-reflection and other aspects of anti-oppressive staff training...the principal and other administrators are not only best positioned but also most responsible for ensuring that both school policy and practice are non-exclusionary (i.e., anti-oppressive) for minority students (86)." In order to provide equitable instruction, it is essential to note that a school leader is not just responsible for the implementation of new practices and initiatives but the dismantling of practices and initiatives that systematically oppress those who have been historically marginalized. Khalifa continues by adding, "Space is not only about student bodies, but also encompasses epistemologies, behaviors, and artifacts associated with distinct

minoritized communities (82)." In particular, educators and principals must be aware of allowing students the space to bring their own culture and experience to the school and not confine them to a historically dominant culture of behavior and experience. Allowing student voices and integrating their identity to permeate the classroom context is essential to creating a transformative school culture. School leaders should provide space for diverse voices in and out of the classroom. Staff and students alike should access affinity groups and ways to share their experiences safely. Siebersma shared practice in his article "School Improvement, Step-by-Step" about a moment that allowed for student and staff voices to be heard across school spaces:

"The staff agreed to clear expectations for implementation of the improvement strategy. Each day during guided reading instruction, they would encourage more student talk and student-to-student interaction by using sentence stems, asking more open-ended questions, and using nonverbal cues to get students to respond to one another's thoughts. The implementation also became a regular topic in collaborative meetings, and staff meetings were repurposed as professional development (1)."

As the community began to value diverse voices, it transformed classroom practice and staff and leadership learning spaces. In contrast, voices that once went unheard in exclusionary spaces now were expressed openly in an inclusive learning community throughout the school. Khalifa reiterates this when he says, "Creating culturally responsive schools means providing *space* for all cultures within a school organization. This concept of space means the physical location and building of the school and the social and historical contexts in which students are perceived (84)." Essential to shared voice is providing knowledge and providing a safe and accepting environment if this is not happening, voices will continue to go unheard. Inclusion can only happen if we do away with exclusionary practices. Khalifa gives a list of historically exclusionary practices and examples of less exclusionary practices that are often not recognized but play a vital role in the oppression of marginalized students.

"Examples of direct exclusionary practices:

- In-school suspension
- Out-of-school suspension
- In-school detention
- Zero-tolerance
- Law enforcement
- Allowing students to miss class
- Deal-making

Examples of less direct exclusionary practices

- Grade retention
- Constant disciplinary referrals
- Unwelcoming to parents
- Not engaging the community
- Not valuing non-white behavior/cultural capital/aesthetic/language/dress
- Hostile treatment
- Emotional abuse
- Constant critique
- Allowing student disengagement (Khalifa, 89)."

How do school leaders bring about inclusivity in the communities they are responsible for? "Principals can achieve this by mentoring teachers on shifting from exclusionary practices to inclusive practices and partnering teachers to mentor each other. Principals should also model inclusive discourse and practice to staff, students, and families. This also may require principals to challenge teachers who continue to practice exclusionary methods, but only if they have built a trusting relationship. Finally, principals should foster self-advocacy among students and families, not to require those marginalized groups to

carry the load of changing the systems, but to empower them as partners in the work (Khalifa, 94)." If leadership is not modeled for those who serve alongside them, the transformation will always be just out of reach. This often doesn't happen in schools, not because people do not believe in it, but the communication and transparency are not there and therefore do not provide spaces or opportunities for the team to collaborate towards a better vision of what could be.

Communication and collaboration are essential as schools move into spaces of inclusivity. A leader must be able to communicate the expectations and bring others alongside during the establishment of processes and development of mission/vision. This is especially true when modeling reflection and transparency, two of the critical components in developing cultural relevance and equitable practices. Jentz states, "So, it's critical to your success at the outset that you commit yourself to learn how to communicate, as opposed to communicating simply to persuade, direct, or inform. You must learn with and through others about your practice; otherwise, you can't make needed adjustments on the authoritative-collaborative dimension of your leadership (59)." When bringing someone along in their reflective practice, it is impossible to force the process on anyone. It must be a journey of inquiry and honesty. Coaching and evaluating someone with cultural relevance within their learning space must be done with gentle and kind guidance. It will require vulnerability, and that will not happen if there is no trust and relationship. Evans reiterates this when he says, "For school leaders to be effective and promote institutional change, they must be authentic. They must inspire trust, which is based upon their integrity, savvy, vision, and strategic biases. Becoming an authentic leader requires one to examine their personal beliefs and experiences. The qualities of authentic leaders are not achievable by all but can be cultivated and developed (134)." Not everyone is going to transform at the same pace. Patience and time are required.

Teachers must be made to be a part of the process. Teachers should be encouraged to contribute and design professional learning opportunities for the staff, supported with resources and advancement

for teachers who engage with teacher-led professional development. Fullan highlights the need for teacher ownership, "[Teachers] feelings of ownership, commitment, and safety as a result of working together toward their own goals provides the strength to persevere and move forward based on their own needs and interests (97)." If one's interests and identity are not being recognized, commitment and interest will diminish. Providing teachers with time to work with like-minded professionals and lead and develop others in their specialty is essential to "ongoing, collaborative, job-embedded, and result-oriented (Dufour, 31)" collaboration and professional development. Trusting one's staff and respecting their talents and abilities will create a team that is open and flexible and willing to take risks and listen to the needs of others. This is the goal of becoming a team committed to reflective practice and cultural relevance.

As a school leader who is working to develop a team of people committed to being culturally relevant and who can connect and build relationships that allow for critique, development, and honest communication, it is no easy task. But when clarity, integrity, and a commitment to a partnership lead the way, it seems that even if the course can get murky, a way out will be found at times. Everyone is at their stage in the journey, and through this, there must be grace and understanding. It is in the nurturing where people find the most development, and when seeking equity and justice, even while we fight, we must also be quick to extend a hand and kind word.

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