Personalized principal leadership practices: Leading equitable, high achieving schools for African American and Latino students

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What If Calvin Was Your Son?

Ms. Northup, Calvin's teacher had become increasingly concerned about his performance and disruptive behavior. Because I was a school administrator, she asked me to visit her class to observe Calvin. Calvin Malden was an imposing 10th grade African American boy who weighed almost 300 lbs. Classmates distanced themselves to avert unintended provocation. Many of Calvin's teachers were intimidated by his posturing and intermittent displays of uncontrollable rage. As a result, Calvin's behavior was often overlooked and missing assignments accrued without mention. Ms. Northup was a young, White teacher who was knowledgeable about her content and cared deeply about students.

During the lesson on the slope of a line, Ms. Northop maintained a balance between lecture, modeling and individual problem-solving. Calvin raised his hand, became visibly agitated and resorted to making vociferous demands when Ms. Northup was not immediately available. This was Calvin's second time taking Algebra I. His struggles were palpable. Calvin had not yet mastered long division, simple subtraction or negative numbers. Without basic skills, attaining success in Algebra would be a formidable task. With significant gaps in Calvin's learning, adequate scaffolding would be difficult.

An important consideration while searching for plausible solutions to improving the achievement of students like Calvin, is to begin with the premise that Calvin is our son. Rather than getting lost in a spreadsheet of nameless numbers, individual solutions would be developed to solve Calvin's individual problems because he is our son. This vignette or majoritarian counterstory of Calvin highlights personalized principal leadership practices as an effective approach for educating students of color. This article examines thoughtful, practical solutions to problems principals encounter as they address vexing problems with minority student underachievement.
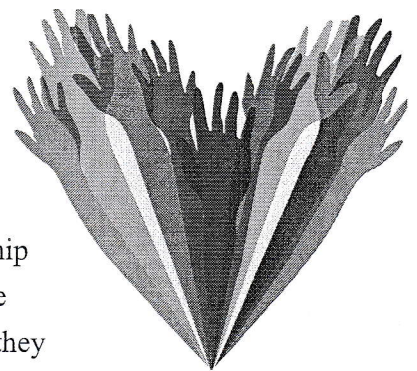
Table 1.0 Principals Leading Equitable, High Achieving Schools

Principal's Name - Pseudonym	Race	Gender	Years of Administrative Experience	Type of School	Socioeconomic Status (% of Free and Reduced Lunch)	% of Minority Students	Size of School
Ms. Eakins	White	Female	11	Suburban	23.2%	46.2%	2,088
Ms. Bridges	White	Female	22	Suburban	28.2%	45.1%	2,345
Dr. Kettle	Asian	Female	15	Suburban	11%	51.1%	1,017
Ms. Fountaine	White	Female	8	Suburban	27.7%	29.8%	1,108
Mr. Bogner	White	Male	12	Suburban	19.1%	80.6%	1,598
Dr. Badger	White	Female	32	Suburban	9.3%	46.2%	2,088
Dr. Dorian	White	Female	19	Suburban	11%	70.5%	2,333
Mr. Dublin	White	Male	17	Suburban	35.2%	67%	601
Mr. Howell	White	Male	10	Suburban	26.1%	22.6%	1,063
Mr. Gallagher	White	Male	24	Suburban	10.2%	12%	1,106
Mr. Gilbert	White	Male	3	Suburban	10.8%	55.8%	905
Ms. Clayton	White	Female	16	Suburban	29.4%	20.1%	1,263
Mr. Miller	White	Male	31	Suburban	25.1%	22%	2,165
Dr. Joseph	White	Male	10	Urban	10.3%	24.4%	1.290
Ms. King	African American	Female	11	Urban	48.3%	94.7%	360
Mr. Stoddard	White	Male	6	Suburban	8.8%	35.9%	1,851
Ms. Lane	White	Female	14	Suburban	5.6%	47.5%	2,185
Dr. Harrison	White	Female	8	Urban	11.7%	42.7%	2,009

Literature Review

Much of the rapid growth in the U.S. minority population can be attributed to the Latino population that will grow by 114% from 17.4% in 2012 to 28.6% in 2060 (U.S. Census, 2015). In Southern states, minorities are already the majority in public schools, representing 51%, Latinos - 20%, Blacks - 27%, Asians - 3% (Suitts, 2010). From 2004-2014, Latino public school enrollment increased 19%-25%, in contrast, Whites decreased 58%-50%, African

Americans decreased 17%-16%, and Asians increased 4-5% (NCES, 2017).

Despite the rising number of minority students attending U.S. schools, national statistics are replete with examples of minority students struggling to meet proficiency on standardized assessments. As this study revealed, some expert principals in the north and southeastern United States have discovered ways to lead equitable, high achieving schools for African American and Latino students. Eighty percent of public school principals in the U.S. are White, 10% are Black, 7% are Latino and 3% are other (NCES, 2016) meaning most principals of diverse schools do not share the same culture as their students. Leadership can be challenging in schools with White administrators who may not think of themselves as having a culture yet are responsible for leading schools with a population of largely Black and Latino students who deeply identify with their cultures. Fraise and Brooks (2015) assert that culturally relevant leaders promote cultural pluralism,

meaning they promote learning environments that value the languages and cultures of all students.

Seven years after his seminal work on successful school leadership, Leithwood (2012) remarked that there are four categories of core leadership practices that are effective across various contexts. Practices were identified as (1) setting directions, that is the development of a shared vision, (2) developing people through capacity building (3) redesigning the organization through collaboration, relationships and community connections and (4) improving the instructional program through staffing and instructional support. Recognizing that changing demographics present unique challenges for principals, Ylimaki, Bennett, Fan and Villasenor (2012) focused on successful leadership in the context of high poverty, challenging schools and determined that successful leadership practices also include culturally relevant practices.

The purpose of this study was to examine the practices that

expert principals utilize to lead schools where African Americans and Latinos are successful.

Culturally Relevant Leadership was applied as a framework and filter to explain the practices school leaders utilized and to examine how this information could be used to create successful schools.

Theoretical Framework

Culturally relevant leadership connects the significance of principals' leadership practices by asking them to explain their leadership practices while critically listening for issues of equity, political context, and cultural proficiency. Horsford, Grosland and Gunn (2011) assert in their theoretical framework that culturally relevant leaders:

- effectively navigate the political context in schools

- synthesize a culturally relevant pedagogical approach

- embark on a personal journey to cultural proficiency

- demonstrate a commitment to a professional duty

Effectively navigating the political context in schools consists of leading increasingly diverse schools with competing values and ideologies in settings with expectations to increase equity and improve outcomes for all students. Utilizing a culturally relevant pedagogical approach, principals encourage teachers to empower students intellectually, socially, emotionally and politically (Ladson-Billings, 1994). These leadership practices are vital in racially diverse social contexts. A personal journey to cultural proficiency involves cross-cultural learning and a willingness to examine epistemologies and assumptions about students from diverse racial, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. A professional duty is defined by leadership that advances equity and addresses conflict with discourse. Additionally, it includes the promotion of academic excellence and cross-cultural engagement so that all student voices are heard. These practices are a reflection of

standards described more fully by the Educational Administration's Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium Standards (2008). This study focused on two of the four tenets presented above, political context and professional journey. In this study, equity referred to raising the achievement of all students while narrowing the gaps between the highest and lowest performing students and eliminating the disproportional number and racial predictability of the student groups that occupy the highest and lowest achievement categories. (Glenn Singleton as cited in Tigard-Tualatin Equity Framework, 2010).

Methodology

A single study of 18 principals was conducted by this researcher, a former elementary and high school principal to investigate the practices that expert principals utilize that have contributed to leading equitable schools. This qualitative study of principals in urban and suburban schools in two states in the northeastern and southeastern United States utilized qualitative interviews as

the primary data gathering method. Interviews were conducted with K-12 principals that lead a regionally or nationally recognized school that had significantly increased the achievement of minority students. Non-magnet public schools where 80% or more of the school's African American and Latino students are proficient on the state's standardized English and math assessments were selected. Pseudonyms instead of actual names for principals or schools are used.

Results

Four practices for principals emerged from the study for leading equitable, high achieving schools: 1) Conduct Equity Listening Tours 2) Make Achievement A Topic of Action 3) Structure For Excellence and 4) Personalize the Data. These practices were developed for underperforming students but benefitted the entire school community.

Conduct Equity Listening Tours

Principal Harrison stated, "I've been on a listening tour. In October and November, there

were some racial events. One of the things I learned was the kids of color were making connections to national events. I went to meet with students to hear about their frustrations." Principal Harrison met with her students about a derogatory racial slur on a student's Chemistry presentation and an after school confrontation between students and an off duty police officer. Principals shared that they dedicated a considerable amount of time to communicating with students. In this study, equity listening tours are focus groups established for students, particularly minority students to provide honest and open feedback to administration about pertinent school issues.

At Principal Joseph's school, he coordinated school-wide focus groups on intolerance. Some students of color inquired about the need for increased diversity in the English curriculum given the school's core class focus on Western civilization.

Sometimes these conversations with students took place in a formal scheduled listening tour format with follow up after the meetings. In other instances

these tours were precipitated by an event or were scheduled in response to student concerns. Principal Miller mentioned, "Students have a voice here. I met with a group of students last week about what we can do to make the school better. We keep dialogue going with students. I have students on my leadership team and School Improvement Team." Principals asked for minority student input, took note of what students shared and after the listening tour, assessed the meetings and took appropriate action.

Make Achievement a Topic of Action

"Achievement is a continued topic of action amongst us," Principal Harrison added. Making achievement a topic of action means *diving deeply* into student data in a group setting. Principals utilized different practices for making achievement a topic of action. Principal Bridges stated, "We *dove deeply* into some of the students. We each took eight students and went back into their elementary transcripts and considered all of the things that could impact education. The

only thing in common was a lack of exposure to Honors level." As Principal Bridges and her administrative team *dove deeply*, they found several students who were high achievers K-3 but then in 4th grade, they found dramatic drops particularly for their African American boys. For her school, lack of minority placement in advanced courses, surfaced as a commonality. It was a troubling discovery especially since elementary and middle school principals in her district focus intently on closing the achievement gap.

Students have a voice here.

Structure for Excellence

Several principals described the leadership practice of developing school-wide structures that have resulted in student academic excellence. Principals ensured that their underachieving minority students were taking advantage of structured support. Principal Stoddard stated, "We have set up a school-wide Tier 2 intervention system that is not

special education. Once a week using our computer system, we flag students based on grades, poor attendance, not turning in work. We capture that information for 1800 students. Administrators and guidance counselors look at the kids for this week, come up with strategies and it is about coming up with different resources for kids." At Principal Stoddard's school, a highly organized school-wide intervention system that is structured to encourage student academic excellence is monitored by administration.

In the context of this study, structuring for excellence means creating structures in schools that increase the performance of underachieving students especially minority students. Principal Badger mentioned, "We have a program, English, Science, Social Studies Opportunities (ESSO) for students not identified with a 504 or Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The aim is to have a core of teachers teaching students how to understand what they are learning." The program which focuses on 9th graders is structured to support students who have some

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executive functioning issues. In leading the program, Principal Badger asks the team of teachers that meet once a week in a case study approach to consider what strategic academic tools they are going to give to students. Additionally, principals prioritized regular scheduled classroom observations to ensure that classroom instruction was meeting the needs of all students. Equity-focused principals who lead diverse schools can develop school-wide initiatives that are designed for minority students but address the interest convergence of White students, as well.

Personalize the Data

"Personalizing the data is something that has made a big impact. Attaching names,

pictures and their own words to the faces and names of students," Principal Dublin. Rather than relying solely on impersonal data reviews, principals personalized data by examining individual student information to get to know their students and their academic/ social stories. Principal Dublin shared, "Every data point has a student's face." Principals identified the names behind the disaggregated numbers of their students, particularly their minority students and developed learner profiles. At some schools, principals review the profiles of every incoming 9th grader to determine if their students can take an Advanced Placement or an honors course and be successful.

Discussion of Findings

Personalized Principal Leadership Practices

Personalized principal leadership practices are the relentless pursuit of equitable learning environments and academic excellence for all students by listening to student voices, *diving deeply*, infusing highly structured interventions and personalizing data reviews.

Achievement is an ongoing topic of action so discussions about underachievement center around individual students and teachers accept the responsibility for educating all children. Principals have convinced their staff that leading successful equitable schools is a moral imperative.

The practices of expert principals that emerged from the principal interviews are described as personalized principal leadership practices. The tenets of personalized principal leadership practices include:

- Conduct equity listening tours

- Make achievement a topic of action

- Structure for excellence

- Personalize data

Conduct Equity Listening Tours

Principals that utilized personalized principal leadership practices conducted equity listening tours. Equity Listening tours were a safe way for minority students to share with administration ways that

If students are not learning, why aren't they learning?

they were experiencing school. In some cases, principals met with all of their students the first two days of each semester. Others conducted monthly student town halls or focus groups for African American and Latino students. Principal Eakins stated, "We do a lot of talking to kids. I ask a kid to tell me what they are struggling with and why. Sometimes just asking them what they need." Principals asked about the challenges their students were encountering. At times listening to students was more informal based on a referral or student incident.

Principals concurred about the importance of talking to minority students, finding out their opinions, needs and individual challenges in a structured format rather than waiting for a crisis to develop. Principals developed strategies for managing unfavorable teacher feedback from students.

The data gleaned from the listening tours were examined for patterns, then shared with faculty, staff and the student body.

Make Achievement a Topic of Action

To make achievement a topic of action rather than just a topic of discussion, action is taken following the analysis of the results that span multiple academic years and grade levels. How principals lead achievement as a topic of action varies significantly. At Principal Eakin's school, when achievement became a topic of action, the administrative team uncovered reasons why some students were not being successful, "Some students had an IEP in 5th grade that wasn't picked up in Middle School, students with 504s buried deep." As achievement remained a topic of action, these expert principals carefully reviewed their student data and introduced accountability measures that ultimately improved the performance of students of color in their schools. Achievement remained in the forefront for each of the principals. Examining low

minority performance on standardized test scores and underrepresentation in advanced courses remained a continued topic of action.

Structure for Excellence

To structure for excellence, principals developed a system for talking about student progress and eliminated structures that impeded minority student achievement.

"You've got to sometimes dig beyond the obvious data..."

Additionally principals described decisions to implement school-wide intervention programs, alter the bell schedule to create an extended lunch period for teacher tutoring or create other structures in their schools to help underachieving minority students perform at high levels. Principal Gallagher developed PAWS, a modified block schedule with four 80 minute periods and one 30 minute advisory period.

In addition to interventions for struggling students, principals recognized the importance of monitoring classroom instruction for improvement, "If I have the right teachers in the classroom who know failure isn't an option. If students are not learning, why aren't they learning? What data is useful that will help the teachers teach and help the students learn?" Principal Dorian. Principals knew that excellent instruction could reduce the need for tutoring and interventions so part of the structure for excellence included regular classroom walkthroughs with teacher feedback. Classroom walkthroughs are brief, non-evaluative classroom observations (Milanowski, 2011).

Personalize Data

In schools where principals utilized personalized principal leadership practices, principals focused on students, data, individual conversations and examining why students were underperforming. Principal Gallagher shared, "You've got to sometimes dig beyond the obvious data. We have a lot of resources so we can have

smaller class sizes." Personalization resulted in tough conversations about the data with faculty. Principal Lane stated, "Putting the data on the table and the hard conversations about grades and attendance of minority students. When we first started looking at data, it was not an earnest approach. It was a band-aid approach. We stopped pretending everybody was the same." Faculty grappled with the data, their own beliefs and assumptions about reasons for minority student underachievement and focused on equitable instructional practices. Teachers accepted responsibility for high achievement of all students.

Implications for Practice

Principals can conduct equity listening tours by leading structured student inquiry meetings with diverse students. Equity listening tours can be conducted by administrators in large groups. Achievement can become a topic of action by conducting comprehensive academic record reviews, developing databases to monitor student performance or creating a part-time technology facilitator position with release

time to monitor the database. To structure for excellence, principals can create a school-wide intervention during the school day to monitor grades. Additionally, lunch-time teacher tutorials can be scheduled. Principals can personalize data by including pictures of students or notes about their individual student stories on powerpoints at faculty meetings or utilize Data Chats.

Conclusions

Profound changes in the public school population have implications for principals who will be faced with educating an increasingly diverse group of students. Creating equitable, high achieving schools where minority students can experience success is vital. It is not that inequities have dissipated entirely in these schools where African American and Latino students excel; rather, it is the awareness of and determination to address inequities that separate high achieving schools where students of color are successful. "We spend less of our time trying to convince teachers that addressing the gap is important, mostly because most of them are there and more of our time addressing individual needs of students and thinking about the systems that we have in place that may have inadvertently exacerbated or perpetuated the gap." Principal Stoddard.

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