"THE NEED FOR CULTURALLY COURAGEOUS LEADERSHIP"

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Every day of the school year, dedicated educators throughout the United States are working hard to inspire, engage, and build upon the strengths of all their students. This mission is not for the faint of heart. Nationwide, some of the sobering realities in many large and small school districts include a wider range of student academic readiness levels in most classrooms in all grades. The response by teachers to the greater diversity in classrooms is multifaceted. Their struggle to provide equitable learning opportunities is affected by a host of variables, among them the kind of support they receive to meet the needs of all students. Culturally courageous leadership is one of the proactive approaches to the dilemmas experienced on a daily basis in classrooms, schools, and school communities. Such leadership focuses on confronting and eliminating any personal and organizational barriers to equitable learning opportunities, such as culturally blind attitudes, inadequate instructional support, and low staff efficacy related to working with racially and culturally diverse students. Teacher expectations and effort have an enormous impact on student motivation and effort. Students need teachers who believe they can succeed.

Racial and cultural differences are often "elephants in the room" no one is willing to openly discuss for a myriad of reasons, discomfort being among them, as well as the fear of saying something that will be perceived as biased or racist. And yet there is a strong interface between, race, culture, and educational decisions, at the district, school site, and classroom level. The support given to defining and providing equitable educational opportunities may not adequately take into

consideration personal and organizational biases. There are topics avoided, and "sacred cows" seldom challenged, such as scheduling (including student grouping practices and time for teacher preparation), teacher norms in how they work together on equity, and school wide scaffolding practices during and beyond the school day. There must be a focus on team building and problem solving for school districts to walk their talk when it comes to equity. Team building must be out of the box, meaning cross-grade, cross-school efforts are needed, as well as more interdisciplinary teaching. Such teaching needs to include students' real life experiences, interests, and goals into lesson plans, so they can see the relevance to their personal lives. Too many historically underserved students, in sixth grade or ninth grade, are three years below grade level. At that point maybe they and their teachers don't believe they can ever catch up to their peers who are at grade level. Nevertheless, there are schools throughout the country where diversity is perceived as an asset and all staff work together to facilitate students' achieving at high levels. What is going on in these schools? In a nutshell, the leadership, curricula, and instruction are more culturally relevant and focused on both critical reflection and critical thinking; there is also a lot of culturally courageous leadership by teachers, instructional support staff, administrators, and parents (Browne, 2012), (Chenoweth 2009), (Johnson, et al, 2013), and (Duncan-Andrade, 2008).

Some examples of culturally courageous leadership (CCL) are:

1. critically examining cultural influences and practices in one's life that may compromise personal effectiveness when working to achieve equitable opportunities and outcomes. This includes scrutiny of how one's personal racial identity influences personal attitudes and behaviors regarding communication styles, teacher authority, specific forms of cultural diversity, and students' behavior.
2. tirelessly working with others to deepen understanding of school/school district cultures, and how the cultures in the work environment may inadvertently cause some organizational barriers to equitable opportunities. For example, organizations with low trust across all levels and groups are not likely to have the morale and cohesion to accomplish equitable learning opportunities. Such opportunities require flexibility and ongoing risk taking to grow individually and collectively in addressing identified problems. Culturally courageous leaders see organizational reflection as a strategy for helping to birth new equity initiatives collectively undertaken.
3. recruiting and encouraging input from all stakeholder groups in the school community, such as teachers, parents, community leaders, administrators, and students, on a vision of what the district and/or school needs to be in terms of achieving equitable learning opportunities and outcomes. CCL's call attention to what districts say vs. what they do, when it comes to equity at all levels, from the board to the classroom to the home.
4. seeking a broader distribution of power amongst school community opinion leaders
5. advocating more inclusive collaboration among district administrators, including those who lead equity programs, when problem solving, planning, and implementing equity services for schools
6. supporting transparency in the decision making process
7. working with others to develop organizational systems/cultures that prepare all students for effectively interacting in a diverse society
8. creating curricula that honor the cultural heritage and contributions of all groups in our society, including study of atrocities perpetuated against certain groups
9. developing constituencies within schools and communities that are ardent advocates for and help implement cultural responsiveness and equity in all aspects of the schooling enterprise
10. Orchestrating expansion of communication channels and ongoing feedback between persons
11. Mediating conflicts, building trust, and judiciously using leverage

12. Developing and using performance based criteria, i.e. qualitative metrics, to improve accountability of all programs and persons re initiatives to achieve equitable learning opportunities and outcomes

In addition to the above leadership, culturally courageous leaders proactively share information about the impact of their racial/cultural background and experiences on their attitudes and behaviors, and what if any changes they have made based on increased consciousness.

WHAT IS THE ROADMAP FOR DEVELOPING AND SUSTAINING CCL IN SCHOOL COMMUNITIES?

Culturally courageous leaders use a counter narrative in their work because it helps keep them from succumbing to all the precepts of cultural hegemony as opposed to cultural democracy. A counter narrative is research based, and includes personal perspectives of those who have experienced inequitable learning opportunities. The narrative is called a "counter" narrative because it provides an alternative to sanitized interpretations of what has happened and is still happening in such areas as cultural and structural racism. However, for counter narratives to be effectively used, CCL's must constantly increase their equity consciousness and change agent skills, and help others do the same. Such consciousness coupled with leadership savvy leads to more comprehensive efforts when tackling the ever evolving conditions of inequity, and when determining educational priorities and accountability for the next 20 years and beyond. CCL is a life long journey, not a destination.

Finally, culturally courageous leaders do not shrink from critically analyzing and trying to improve the power relations between individuals with different identities, priorities, privileges, and roles. They work with very diverse persons to create qualitatively and quantitatively different interventions to achieve equity consciousness. For example, culturally courageous teacher leaders might take the initiative to work with their colleagues on equity initiatives, and invite student, parent, community, and support staff representatives into their dialogue. The key is not doing equity work in isolation from school district functions, such as management, curriculum development, instruction, or community advocacy. Such work norms within and across groups can increase the inclusiveness, self esteem, cohesion, synergy, and productivity of all involved, which can stimulate greater efforts and efficacy by both staff and students. CCL is the key to this happening because cultural democracy should be on everyone's agenda, and not perceived as only a Black or Brown thing that is not relevant or desirable for students of all races, cultures, and backgrounds. Such a perception is seldom acknowledged, and if so, not publicly. Equity/social justice is needed by students of all racial/cultural backgrounds for effective functioning in both American society and the global economy.

DISTRICT AND SCHOOL SITE LEADERSHIP

The educational leadership demanded in 21st century America may seem herculean, given the vast changes and conflicts in the broader society, and also the demands of very diverse constituencies who have conflicting perceptions and priorities. It is not possible to be a strong instructional leader without also simultaneously being a culturally courageous leader. Systemic approaches are essential to level the playing field, and total commitment is needed to do so. District and school site leaders committed to equity should attempt to be involved in or otherwise influence the following areas:

1. community awareness and support for funding equity initiatives at greater levels, which will require making hard choices about how priorities are established to support equity initiatives,

2. staff selections consistent with equity priorities, such as documented expertise in helping historically underserved students exert the effort to become academically successful,
3. curriculum content that is culturally relevant and culturally responsive.
4. collaboration among staff to do equity work that respects students' multiple identities
5. professional development on equity that utilizes research based instructional delivery and professional development standards. There is too little attention during professional development on reducing achievement gaps by more effectively teaching students of African American and Latino/Hispanic background; delivery standards need to include guidance for effectively teaching culturally diverse students.
6. more substantive attention during principal instructional rounds to teacher expectations, checking for understanding, and enhancing socio-emotional skills/situational mediation(Murrell, 2008) especially with male students of color who may erroneously be labeled as academically at risk or discipline problems
7. improvement of equity accountability protocols for staff at all levels, making sure they include demonstration of equity competencies and achievement of equity goals.

Culturally courageous leaders at district and school sites should develop and use performance based criteria (utilizing both qualitative and quantitative data) for staff, as well as multiple kinds of assessments for students that are culturally responsive. To phase in such change, strategic planning is necessary. The process of strategic planning is as important if not more so than the products of such planning, because accountability for equity is a very political endeavor that cannot be done in a lone ranger style with everyone choosing what to do independently of each other. There needs to be some balance (a mix of tight and loose coupling) between top down changes in work relationships to support systemic equity and allowing complete discretion of individuals to decide how to proceed.

Many if not most will have different ideas of what constitutes equity transformation. The change efforts can be fraught with misunderstandings, accusations, resistance, and sabotage, to say the least, because everyone usually wants to protect their priorities and programs. Battles between constituencies are intense when various programs are competing for limited resources (usually title one or other categorical funds), with all claiming equity is integral to their efforts. Equity transformation will not begin to occur or be sustained over time without buy in from a critical mass. Sustained equity usually requires more resources/funding, not less, and therefore some existing programs in districts may become vulnerable. Equity programs must find more ways to collaborate in their equity work, which may help individual programs become more robust and effective.

Therefore, leadership for systemic equity requires active involvement of school district leadership at the board, executive, middle management, and school site levels, including site administrators, teacher, support staff, and parent/community leaders. If all stakeholders, including students, aren't meaningfully involved in equity initiatives, there is less chance equitable outcomes will be successful to a high degree and stay that way. Leaders within each group and subgroups must be prepared, supported, and accountable for facilitating such unison within their spheres of influence, and for collaborating with persons who have expertise in areas other than their own. Such collaboration may not be willingly undertaken.

Those who are often left out of the joint effort to achieve equity in school districts are university faculty in teacher and administrator preparation as well as advanced programs. When feasible, appropriate higher education faculty, with the willingness and expertise, need to be recruited as resources to district equity efforts. They may have taught some of those faculty and administrators having the highest learning curve.

CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

An example of a major challenge in curriculum and instruction is when trying to integrate diversity content into mainstream curricula. In some districts, there is a lot of resistance to such efforts because teachers are very protective of the curriculum they were initially trained to teach and have been teaching. Most teachers aren't eager to teach topics with which they are uncomfortable, feel unprepared to teach, or disagree with. Therefore, there is usually a need to enhance the wrap around support services provided by districts to each school, so all formal and informal leaders at sites are committed and better prepared to help shape such curriculum integration. Another question to consider is whether curriculum integration is the best approach if wanting to provide students more in-depth exposure to content focusing on such concepts as identity, human differences, diversity, conflict, and prejudice/discrimination. Curriculum integration may result in a cosmetic sanitized gloss over of ethnic content with little substance. However, there is now more awareness by teachers and school districts of the need for help on instructional delivery related to equity content, and the help provided needs to be based on state of the art training protocols, use of social media, and adult learning theory. Transformational leadership requires equity leaders developing equity leaders, and the "coaches" need to be prepared to help the next generation of equity leaders know how to be ready for whatever occurs in American education. They need to be up to date in all areas of instructional leadership, which is constantly evolving.

Curriculum and instruction are at the heart of a school district's mission, because they are the embodiment of what is considered most important for students to maximize their potential. Thus, it should be no surprise when community activists of all backgrounds and careers lobby school district decision makers to agree with their proposals about essential standards, instructional materials to use when teaching to the standards, and pedagogy. Curriculum theorist and scholar Ralph Tyler (1949) developed a curriculum model that includes use of several screens to make sure proposed learning objectives are consistent with the perceived needs and priorities of the learner. However, the process for determining learner needs is often inadequate in the minds of community activists. The voices of those most concerned about the omissions and distortions in humanities curriculum materials when it comes to diversity may or may not be truly heard and valued. One of the "elephants" in the room not often acknowledged is that powerful forces lobby for certain content and against other content, based on what they think America has been and what America is. The fight that occurs is over how to portray America to the world, and how to influence the way students think about their country and themselves. Social studies curricula are vehicles for transmitting the image and beliefs we want perpetuated in our society, even if they are primarily based on Eurocentric ideas and myths. Such curricula help influence students' self concept and esteem.

Culturally courageous leaders mount serious challenges to any curricula that doesn't acknowledge and include information about the cultural heritage and accomplishments of the diverse ethnic/cultural groups making up our society as a whole. In addition, there are many variables needing attention when attempting to facilitate mastery of academic language in speech and writing by English language learners and English speakers whose primary language isn't academic English. Students of African descent and others who have not developed a foundation for use of mainstream academic English need to develop those skills to be competitive in the marketplace (although that is not the case for those considered Caucasian). Many teachers are not comfortable with teaching English as a second language to African Americans and other native born Americans, but are ok with ESL programs whose students may not initially know any English. The legislation and thinking about ESL has a very narrow focus on target audiences for ESL.

The cultural context of education is very important to consider. The beliefs, feelings, and values, especially racial attitudes in the United States, have been and continue to be major barriers to a more pluralistic curriculum. When schools lack a multicultural learning environment that values diversity, it affects what is taught and how it is taught. An inequitable learning environment includes having a very low percentage of Black and Hispanic students in gifted or advanced placement

classes, without support systems to increase the percentage in such classes, and also to democratize the curriculum in such classes.

Some major initiatives in so-called common core curriculum and instruction do not provide direction on how teachers are to integrate diversity concepts into their academic curriculum and instruction. Although it was unstated, the purpose of education in the United States for over 150 years was not to provide students of color with "education for liberation," but "education for submission," and those attitudes still exist. And even with all the new initiatives, public education is largely void of any explicit attention to the interface of race, culture, and educational decision making. Even embracing such a phrase as "education for liberation" is culturally courageous, because public acknowledgement and elaboration on what is desired are important steps for social justice to be achieved.

To keep 21st century skills from being taught in a vacuum, the highly touted problem-based and project based curricula in the humanities and STEM areas must include a focus on learner's life experiences, struggles, and concerns as they perceive them, as well as stimulate an interest in career paths they had not imagined for themselves. Schools need to determine whether there is a tendency to only teach with a middle class white orientation, which when done, is counterproductive to a major espoused goal of the new common core: to prepare students to be literate across all academic subjects, and able to interact effectively with persons of all backgrounds in order to be successful.

Tagged in:

- school districts
- leadership development
- cultural diversity

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