EXPLORING EQUITY ISSUES:

Culturally Responsive Leaders

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PART I: TIMES HAVE CHANGED, AND THEY HAVEN'T

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that in 2014, students of color represented slightly more than half (50.5%) of all public school students, an increase from 38.8% in 2000 (McFarland et al., 2018). Meanwhile, teacher demographics have remained stagnant. NCES data list 81.9% of public school teachers in 2012 as White (the latest year available), a small decrease from 84.3% in 2000 (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016, US ED, 2016). They are not just White; they are predominantly White, female, and

middle class. Why is this important? Research shows that students' race, ethnicity, and cultural background significantly influence their achievement (Aceves & Orosco, 2014). Yet many teachers are inadequately prepared to address the needs of their culturally and linguistically diverse learners (Skiba, et al., 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Miller, 2009).

Culturally responsive teachers can close the achievement gap by fostering academic optimism, raising expectations of excellence, connecting with each student's prior knowledge, and delivering content knowledge in ways students can understand (Ball & Forzani, 2011; Farr, 2010; Brown et al., 2009; Miller, 2009). Culturally responsive leaders nurture and maintain high-quality teaching, and foster an inclusive community that builds on teacher, student, and family assets.

The recognition that schools need culturally responsive teachers and

leaders is not new. In 2005, the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) published a report on preparing and supporting diverse, culturally responsive leaders (then referred to as culturally competent leaders). It grew out of a series of meetings among practitioners in the field. It was intended to provide field-based insights from people working in/with leadership-development programs for school leaders across the country. The report outlined five themes:

1. Educational leaders who are not culturally competent cannot be fully effective.

2. Culturally competent leaders work to understand their own biases as well as patterns of discrimination. They have the skills to mitigate the attendant negative effects on student achievement and the personal courage and commitment to persist.

3. Much of what culturally competent leaders must know and be able to do is learned in relationships with families and communities.

4. Culturally competent leadership develops over time and needs to be supported from preparation through practice. Creating collaborative frameworks and structures can be useful.

5. State and local policies need to build a sense of urgency about preparing culturally competent leaders (IEL, 2005).

A Case Study

CEE engaged in a technical assistance project with a school district that was designed to assist educators in becoming culturally responsive leaders. This district of 3,600 students had four elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. Its student population was 77% White, 3% African American, 13% Asian, 4% two or more races, and 4% Latino/a. Less than 1% were English learners and 4% were economically disadvantaged.

One of the superintendent's priorities for the school year was for district staff to develop an understanding of the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy and practice. He requested assistance to facilitate conversations on race, class, and gender. The district had received three complaints from families who reported receiving unfair treatment. He recognized the challenges of addressing potentially deeply-rooted biases.

CEE began work at the elementary school with the greatest diversity of students. CEE offered a professional

development workshop to about 50 school staff along with the superintendent. The workshop was designed to allow persons of different backgrounds to gain an understanding of culturally responsive teaching in a non-threatening way. It focused on developing an understanding of how cultural background and prior experiences shape mindsets and worldviews. The goal was for teachers to be able to use this information to shape how they engage with and support students from diverse backgrounds. The session provided an opportunity for teachers and the superintendent to discuss reports from some families regarding their discomfort in the district and how the district could implement strategies to address these concerns.

Initial teacher response to the session was generally positive, but teachers questioned why the district was offering this session. They also appreciated having an opportunity for discussion and the reminder that people are defined by so many characteristics. But they would have liked to have been given suggestions on how to treat students more equitably and given more time to brainstorm together to come up with a plan and tools for engaging parents in this work.

CEE conducted a discussion with a smaller group of school and district staff to see how to move the project more quickly. They agreed to focus on facilitating sessions among teachers to help them feel less defensive and become more open to addressing issues of culture and equity in the district. To be successful, staff need the rationale behind the professional development so that they are better prepared to engage in difficult conversations.

PART II: WHAT CAN WE DO?

There are many preconditions to becoming a culturally responsive leader. Our case study highlighted the following lessons learned:

FOSTER RELATIONSHIPS

Foster relationships between district leadership and staff to discuss issues such as school climate, cultural responsive pedagogy and practice, authentic family and community

engagement, and equitable opportunities for students. Culturally responsive leaders have the capacity to break down systems of practice that perpetuate inequities. They need to engage people from different cultures and to act as cultural brokers. This means they must communicate effectively a culturally responsive vision and goals, not always an easy task. They must simultaneously be a catalyst for change while handling dissonance. Above all, they need to create a safe environment for courageous conversations about cultural responsiveness, and where people are held accountable.

BUILD TRUST FIRST

Build trust and establish relationships prior to providing professional development. This will enable staff to acknowledge, accept, and reflect on their own biases and potential consequences for their school or district. This valuable reflection time will more likely lead to buy-in from staff and enable sustainability. The staff also needs professional supports to engage in this challenging work.

BE TRANSPARENT
Be transparent about the reasons for professional development and create a

thriving, culturally responsive professional learning community. Provide the rationale for the professional development so participants are better prepared to engage in difficult conversations. Culturally responsive leaders are vulnerable with staff as they engage in these discussions. As the case studied showed, teachers questioned why they were attending this particular topic for professional development. A thriving, culturally responsive professional learning community supports adult learning that is reflective of student racial and cultural backgrounds and includes educator of color voices.

CULTIVATE STRONG LEADERS

Cultivate strong leadership within the school building and district to build and sustain the necessary cultural and instructional changes. Culturally responsive leaders need an understanding of critical theories about how people learn. They also need to know the impact of race, power, legitimacy, cultural capital, poverty, disability, ethnicity, gender, age, language, and other factors on learning. Equally important, they need to understand patterns of discrimination, inequalities, and injustice associated with individual groups. Finally, they

need to be able to articulate their own philosophy of education and to examine whether they use it to maintain the status quo or to empower others' active participation in their own transformation.

KNOW YOUR DISTRICT AND YOUR BUILDING

Whether using an external consultant or a qualified district staff member, devote sufficient time to learn about your district characteristics, needs, and interests. A culturally responsive leader knows who is in their district and who is in the building and community. Addressing cultural responsiveness requires a tailored approach. Culturally responsive leaders should understand the cultural history of their schools, families, and communities. They should aim to possess a global perspective. Culturally responsive leaders also know and question their own values, commitments, beliefs, prejudices, and uses of power and influence. They must be able to understand a variety of contexts and situations and to accept challenges that arise.

Conclusion

Culturally responsive leadership improves learning (Darling-Hammond, 2010). The work of educational leaders is to ensure that teachers have the knowledge and skills necessary to ensure that every student receives the highest quality instruction every day. When educational leaders lack cultural understanding, they may react defensively in the face of diversity to maintain the status quo (IEL, 2005). When educational leaders understand the cultural context, they can set a tone for collaboration and facilitate academic excellence.

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The Essential Elements of Cultural Competence

#1   ASSESSING CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE

What would a culturally responsive leader do?
Assemble his/her collaborative leadership team to reassess the extent to which cultural knowledge of students is clearly present in the school's vision and mission.

#2   VALUING DIVERSITY

What would a culturally responsive leader do?
Conduct a school climate survey and determine whether school policies and procedures value cultural diversity.

#3   MANAGING THE DYNAMICS OF DIFFERENCE

What would a culturally responsive leader do?
Examine and monitor the extent to which Culturally Responsive Classroom Management and Culturally Responsive Positive Behavior Supports and Management Systems are in place and contribute to reducing the frequency of discipline referrals, suspensions, and expulsions.

#4   ADAPTING TO DIVERSITY

What would a culturally responsive leader do?
Monitor the extent to which s/he strategically and systematically engages teacher leaders in collaborative inquiry as a means for transforming the process of decision-making.

#5   INSTITUTIONALIZING CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE

What would a culturally responsive leader do?
Examine the extent to which the protocols for teacher placement, teacher performance observation, and teacher evaluation take into account the experience of schooling of students who are disproportionately underserved.

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