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Commentary

Preparing School Principals for a Diverse and Changing World

Gilbert Davila

The mission of the School of Leadership Studies at Kansas State University is to develop “knowledgeable, ethical, caring, inclusive leaders for a diverse and changing world” (School of Leadership Studies, 2009). As a former elementary and secondary school principal, the author understands and appreciates the imperative to prepare elementary and secondary school leaders for a diverse and changing world where: One out of three children nationwide is from an ethnic or racial minority group; one out of seven speaks a language other than English at home; and one out of fifteen was born outside the United States (Miramontes, Nadeau, & Commins, 1997). In less than two decades, half of students in public schools will be nonwhite and Hispanic, with half of those students speaking a language other than English on their first day of school (Garcia, 2001). Further, by 2050, it is projected that the historical non-Hispanic, white majority in the United States will have decreased from over two-thirds of the population to slightly more than half (Marx, 2002).

Classrooms will be filled with students who are trying to bridge multiple languages and two cultures. Many principals, new and experienced, may not feel that they are fully prepared to lead their schools into this new world (Herrity & Glassman, 1999). To that end, the purpose of this commentary is to provide them with the means to navigate successfully the challenges of meeting the educational needs of children from an increasingly diverse student population. In sum, principals must become inclusive leaders and change agents who are interculturally competent.

Inclusive Leadership

To create an environment where all students’ educational needs are met, the traditional role of the principal as the ultimate school authority must shift to one of inclusivity. Inclusive leadership is the intentional and ethical practice of leadership actions and processes in a manner that affirms the identity of others, acknowledges their needs, and actively includes all constituents (Karim, Shoop, & Finnegan, 2007). As an inclusive leader, the principal becomes effective through influence rather than through control and has the confidence to set

high expectations and continuously uphold the school’s vision. Leadership remains a critical element. However, the potential for exercising leadership goes beyond an individual, extending throughout the system, thereby fostering greater participation (Miramontes et al., 1997).

The Principal as Change Agent

Meeting the learning needs of diverse students will require changes in business as usual. Principals and their teams—teachers, support staff, parents, students—need to urge each other to do something different, to change teaching methods, to adopt new curricula, and to allocate funding differently (Cole, 1995). Efforts to break the ineffective, continual cycle of curriculum rewrites has resulted in an emphasis on the study of change dynamics in public schools. Change and restructuring are not synonymous. Restructuring implies more than change. It implies a type of change – a positive, purposeful evolution from an ever-maturing vision of what is good in public education (Keefe, Valentine, Clark, & Irvin, 1994).

Helping to frame the principal’s role in directing and supporting change is *Leading Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do* (NAESP, 2001) which identified six standards that principals should understand and practice:

- Lead schools in a way that places student and adult learning at the center.
- Set high expectations and standards for the academic and the social development of all students and the performance of adults.
- Demand content and instruction that ensure student achievement of agreed upon academic standards.
- Create a culture of continuous learning for adults tied to student learning and other school goals.
- Use multiple sources of data as diagnostic tools to assess, identify, and apply instructional improvement.
- Actively engage the community to create shared responsibility for student and school success.

These standards are crucial in helping all students achieve academic success. Principals can no longer simply be administrators and managers – they must be leaders in improving instruction and student achievement. In addition, leadership must be a balance of management and vision (NAESP, 2001). Principals must function as instructional leaders and change agents (Fullan, 1998; Hargreaves & Fink, 2004). They must be able to articulate to parents, staff, and students the practices, rationales, and methodologies best suited for diverse student populations.

Some principals, however, may find themselves challenged by their lack of understanding and knowledge of the needs of culturally diverse students. Building a strong knowledge base of instructional methodologies and cultural norms can be instrumental in shaping the instructional program for culturally diverse students (Herrity & Glasman, 1999). According to Miramontes and coauthors (1997), principals who have a growing culturally diverse student population need to enhance their own professional development to include knowledge in the following areas:

- Rationale and theory of bilingual education
- Second language acquisition
- Bilingual/English as a Second Language instructional methodology
- Organizational models and scheduling for bilingual instruction

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- Cultural norms and diversity issues
- Pragmatics related to diversity

Principals who are knowledgeable about these areas and the best instructional practices for culturally diverse students will find themselves better prepared to lead the challenging school environments (Gonzalez, Huerta-Macias, & Tinajero, 1998).

Principals are central to protecting individual learners and to ensuring that learning occurs in an environment consistent with constitutional commitment to equity and equality (Middleton, 1999). Building leaders are in a unique and powerful position, and play a critical role in effecting restructuring – the positive, purposeful move from aspiration to reality – necessary in our schools to best serve culturally diverse students. Building leaders are faced with difficult personal and professional questions regarding diversity, and they must be prepared to make decisions that will positively impact culturally diverse students. This suggests that building leaders would benefit from opportunities such as structured diversity training for their personal multicultural development.

Intercultural Competence

Employing concepts from cognitive psychology and constructivism, Bennett (1993) created a framework of six stages of increasing sensitivity to cultural differences. The underlying assumption of the model is that as an individual experiences cultural differences he or she becomes more competent in intercultural relations (Morris, 2008). The stages move from ethnocentrism, where an individual's own culture is experienced as central to reality in some way, to ethnorelativism, where an individual's culture is experienced in the context of other cultures (Menken, 2000).

Menken proposed that principals assess their school environment by using Bennett's six stage model, as follows:

1. Denial. Does not recognize cultural differences.
2. Defense. Recognizes some differences but sees them as a negative.
3. Minimization. Unaware of projection of own cultural values; sees own values as superior.
4. Acceptance. Shifts perspectives to understand that the same "ordinary" behavior can have different meanings in different cultures.
5. Adaptation. Can evaluate others' behavior from their frame of reference and can adapt behavior to fit the norms of a different culture.
6. Integration. Can shift frame of reference and also deal with resulting identity issues.

It is important to note that someone may be at different points on the continuum depending on the diversity dimension in his or her school environment. For example, an individual may be at the acceptance stage with regard to race and at the defense stage with regard to cultural differences.

In the first stage, denial, an individual denies that cultural differences exist. This belief may reflect either physical or social isolation from people of different cultural backgrounds (Morris, 2008).

In the second stage, defense, an individual acknowledges the existence of certain cultural differences, but because those differences are threatening to his or her own reality and sense of self, the individual constructs defenses against those differences (Morris, 2008). It is in this stage that principals see the cultural differences. However, differences from themselves or the norms of the school environment are

perceived negatively. Differences are seen as a threat to the centrality and "rightness" of their own value system. In this stage, principals may fail to communicate effectively with the changing population. The task they must set for themselves is to become more tolerant of differences and to see the basic similarities among people of different cultures.

In the third stage, minimization, individuals try to avoid stereotypes and even appreciate differences in language and culture, but they still views many of their own values as universal, rather than viewing them simply as part of their own ethnicity (Bennett, 1993). The task building principals must assume at the third level is to learn more about their own culture but avoid projecting that culture onto other people's experience. This stage is difficult to pass through when one's cultural group has vast and unrecognized privileges when compared to other groups. This problem is sometimes so invisible that a principal may be mystified when representatives of ethnic minorities consistently withdraw from collaborative activities. However, little improvement in the quality of education can be expected if the building leader and staff are below the third level of intercultural sensitivity.

In the fourth stage, acceptance, an individual recognizes and values cultural differences without evaluating those differences (Bennett, 1993). It is this stage that requires building leaders to shift perspective, while still maintaining their commitments to values. The task in this stage is to understand that the same behavior can have different meanings in different cultures. In order for collaboration to be successful long-term, this stage of intercultural sensitivity must be reached (Adams, 1999).

In the fifth stage, adaptation, individuals develop and improve skills for interacting and communicating with people of other cultures. A principal in this stage is able to take the perspective of another culture and operate successfully within that culture. This ability usually develops in a two-part sequence (Bennett, 1993). It requires that the principal know enough about his or her culture and a second culture to allow a mental shift to the value schema of the other culture. It also requires an evaluation of behavior based on the second culture's norms, not the norms of the individual's culture of origin (Morris, 2008). In other words, the key skill at this stage is the ability to look at the world "through different eyes."

The final stage of the Bennett model is integration. Individuals in this stage not only value a variety of cultures but also constantly define their own identity and evaluate behavior and values in contrast to and in concert with a multitude of cultures. Building leaders who rise above the limitations of living in one cultural context integrate aspects of their own original cultural perspectives with those of other cultures (Morris, 2008). By implementing an assessment of one's knowledge base with Bennett's model, building leaders will know where they are on the continuum and how they might create a vision for restructuring a program.

It must be noted that in order for a person, in this case a principal, to be bicultural and operate as a liaison between cultures, it is not sufficient for him or her to be from an ethnic minority. In fact, if a person who looks like a member of an ethnic minority group has adopted Anglo American values and identifies with mainstream culture, he or she may be a poor choice to represent their culture of origin in collaborative efforts (Garcia, 2001).

Culturally competent principals can create a decision-making process within the community of the school that will be sensitive

to the needs of all students. The principal will understand that a student's ethnic or cultural background does not necessarily indicate the student's values or explain behaviors; rather, it alerts the school leadership team to possible areas of miscommunication that need to be resolved. The principal is able observe more carefully where that individual fits on a continuum of values compared to his or her ethnic group. This is the capacity principals need in order to create change and develop best practices for educating a diverse student population.

The role of the building principal is critical. Instead of being a top-down manager, the building principal must assume a role of instructional leader in a shared decision-making process (Garcia, 2001). True leaders in a school become effective through influence rather than through control, and they must have the confidence to set high expectations and continuously uphold the vision of their school (Miramontes et al., 1997). As more and more ownership is taken, many more leaders emerge, and ultimately most staff will be able to clearly and strongly support and articulate the vision.

Conclusion

All students have the right to a quality education. At the same time, future principals will likely face the challenge of educating the most diverse student body since the turn of the 20th century. To ensure that all students are academically successful, principals need to become inclusive, interculturally competent change agents. Principals play a pivotal role in the operation and organization of all activities of schools – instructional, curricular, assessment, and community relations. Through their actions as well as their words, they express their institution's mission. Furthermore, principals take responsibility for articulating and creating a shared commitment to that mission in the school and community. Inclusive, interculturally competent principals publicly state their belief that all students are entitled to a high quality education. The principal's knowledge of and sensitivity to diverse student populations and their educational needs must be paired with the ability to act as change agents if principals are to achieve the goal of improving life in schools for all students. Although there are many avenues for principals to develop these capacities, a major focus of leadership coursework for aspiring principals needs to be the development of intercultural awareness and sensitivity.

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