Principal Preparation: The Intersectionality of Race and Educational Justice in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools

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ABSTRACT

Newly employed school site principals are thrust into a socio-political learning environment where whiteness and institutional racism exist. Thus, it is critically important that embedded throughout principal preparation, enrolled teachers learn, experience, and "see" race and the intersectionality of race and educational justice in the public school learning environment.

"**T**o achieve racial equity in education not only do individuals' mindsets need to be shifted to a more anti-racist ideology, but the institutions in which they work need to make profound anti-racist changes as well" (Welton et al., 2018, p. 1). Faculty who teach principal preparation courses, the public school teachers who enroll in them, and their public school site leaders who supervise them all experience educational challenges within a sociopolitical learning environment that was emphasized by the COVID-19 pandemic. Since public elementary and secondary schools are part of long-standing institutions of education, they are microcosms of society as a whole, whereby newly hired school-site leaders are thrust into a politicized world.

As schools grapple with public safety, research points to a learning environment that is filled with inequities, racism, and the normalization of whiteness and white privilege (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Spikes, 2018). Are newly hired novice principals, able to not only recognize, but address racial and educational injustices that occur on their campuses in order to relieve racial barriers to opportunities within their school learning environment? Are new school-site principals ready and prepared for the multiracial schools they are about to lead?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Color Blind and Color-Evasive Educational Leadership

According to Miller and Martin (2015), principals are not prepared to address racial inequities. They point to leadership responsibilities such as providing professional development for their communities of practice around the achievement gap and mining student academic data, but they argue about the commonality of deficit thinking, underlying biases and assumptions, and the utilization of a colorblind approach.

Utilizing a color-bind approach in education supports the status quo and power of whiteness, and it suggests that color-blindness and color-evasiveness is deliberative, purposefully devaluing or minimizing race in education (Annamma et al., 2017; Burke, 2019). According to Shah and Coles (2020), educators need to understand how race and racism intersect on a daily basis within the school learning environment, "proposing the notion of racial noticing" (p. 584). Lindsey et al. (2020) have targeted the need for ongoing cultural competency training so that educators learn the extent to which an individual's personal implicit bias impacts educational opportunity of their racially minoritized students.

There is extant research regarding disparate achievement between students of color and white students in public education and varying steps to address the academic achievement gap (Fullan et al., 2004; Reeves, 2007), including how school site-leaders are second to only teachers in affecting students' academically (Leithwood et al., 2010); the correlation

between a positive school climate (Voight et al., 2013) and social emotional learning with increases to academic success (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Noguera, 2018).

School-site leaders learn how academic achievement data can reflect racial equity gaps. However, school-site leaders must also learn how to respond authentically with actions that address and disrupt the structural barriers that cause racial equity gaps. Is there a lens other than a color blind or color evasive lens that principal preparation programs can provide to teachers preparing to become administrators?

Anti-Racist Educational Leadership

According to Kendi (2019), educators in leadership must listen to the voices of their minoritized students of color: voices calling for help. Then they must act by becoming an anti-racist educational leader. In other words, this is leadership no longer allowing the normalization of black failure and no longer accepting the inequities and barriers placed in front of racially minoritized students as the status quo, but instead creating transformative institutional change (Welton et al., 2018). Is there practice in principal preparation programs to acknowledge inequitable policies and practices within school learning environments and truly understand school site leadership actions in order to address them?

In the state of California, the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) provides school leaders a collaborative road map to address the equity gap within school sites (Local Control, n.d.). Are teachers in principal preparation programs learning how to prioritize budget needs through an authentic, culturally competent, and caring lens removed from the power of whiteness, personal bias, and assumptions of racial judgement?

Educational Leaders as Abolitionists

Current National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2021) national data reveal that as of 2017-2018, the demographic distribution of public school teachers in the United States includes 79% of teachers in US public schools as White, and only 17% were teachers of color (i.e., 6% Black, 9% Hispanic and 2% Asian. However, the demographic distribution of public school principals reveals that 77% of school site leaders in the United States are White, with only 20% of principals of color (i.e., 10% Black, 9% Hispanic, and less than 1% Asian. Meanwhile, during the same school year of 2017-2018, the demographic distribution of public school students in the United States includes 47% of students as White, and 47% students of color (i.e., 15% Black, 27% Hispanic, and 5% Asian; National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). This exposes the lack of educator racial diversity within the school learning environment since 80% of public school teachers and 77% of school site principals in the United States schools are White, while more than 47% of students are people of color.

Lacking educator diversity negatively affects racial and educational justice for students of color (Billingsley et al., 2019). Love (2019) argues that educators must genuinely believe the "mattering" of Black lives. Abolitionist educational leadership represents those who act with a sense of urgency, understanding the necessity to transform the school learning environment and address institutional racism, thus providing educational freedom for Black students (Love, 2020). But in order to truly affect organizational and cultural change within the public school learning environment, there needs to be space for acknowledging and discussing race (Irby & Clark, 2018): "Yet not all preparation programs are truly engaging in the critical conversations about race, in particular, that are necessary to adequately prepare reflective and transformative school leaders" (as cited in Martinez & Welton, 2017, p.123). Do teachers enrolled in principal preparation programs have the opportunity to discuss race and racism? Is it as teachers say, "drive by professional development," or is it embedded throughout all mandatory courses?

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

If principal preparation programs just prepare educators to disaggregate achievement data and build school improvement plans without providing the time and space to discuss race and racial inequities, then public school site-leaders will maintain the status quo of Whiteness, including biases and assumptions (Chin et al., 2020), without authentically addressing the racial barriers to educational opportunities for their racially minoritized students. Gray and Mendoza-Reis (2021) suggest utilizing a social justice conceptual framework as the lens for principal preparation programs so that school-site leaders can learn how to disrupt the "persistent failure rates of students of color who have been marginalized through systemic inequities" (p. 2).

According to Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay (2021), equity-centered principals' actions can reflect an understanding of need that results in increased resources and support for racially minoritized students. This may include hiring a more diverse

faculty, utilizing budgets to address academic and social emotion needs of underserved students, and placing highly effective teachers in classrooms that historically maintain least effective and/or minimal teaching years of experience.

The Covid pandemic exposed multiple barriers to academic and social opportunities (i.e., academic and social resources) and thus shined a light on the disparities and structural inequities that racially and economically minoritized students of color face in the public school learning environment. In other words, the pandemic revealed the intersectionality of race, racism, and educational justice. Yet, Ladson-Billings (2021) suggests the Covid-19 pandemic also provides an opportunity for a "hard reset" in lieu of the continued normalization of anti-Blackness and deficit-based approach towards racially minoritized students of color by returning to the elements and lens of cultural proficiency (p.72).

Since Leithwood et al. (2010) revealed that principals are second only to teachers in impacting student achievement, and Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay (2021) furthered this idea by revealing that principals impact the entire school and social opportunity (not just student achievement), it is incumbent upon principal preparation programs to disrupt the continuation of the status-quo and authentically address institutional racism. In fact, Irby and Clark (2018) point to race talk and the need to build collaborative educator teams for organizational learning to address race and racism and ultimately advance racial equity in public schools.

In conclusion, as Spikes (2018) suggests, school-site leaders must learn first and then provide professional development that is "job embedded, instructionally focused, data driven, collaborative, and race centered, aiding participants in understanding race and the impact of race and racism on schooling" (p. 13). Therefore, principal preparation programs must not only acknowledge but strategically address the impact of race and the resulting racial inequities as a major component in the development of new educational leaders by utilizing a lens of anti-Blackness and a framework centered around equity (Ishimaru & Gallaway, 2021) through which to teach and authentically develop new principals. Moreover, principal preparation programs must provide culturally proficient guidance, training, and strategies, including race talk (Irby & Clark, 2018) to help new principals become change agents and equity advocates so that pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade students have the opportunity to reach their highest potential. Our racially minoritized elementary and secondary students deserve no less.

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