



Ensuring social justice and a diverse and equitable leadership

Education leaders are charged with meeting the needs of all students, and must understand the difference between diversity and equity.

The essence of leadership for social justice and equity is “praxis,” that which Brazilian educator Paulo Freire described as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it.” It is to do the right thing in spite of the obvious barriers one encounters.

Transforming the educational system through “intentional activism” indisputably calls for courageous leadership. Although it may be true that the term “courageous” is frequently overused, it is accurate, in that to do the right thing often calls for stepping outside one’s comfort zone.

As an example, a well-known feature among California State University schools of education as teachers and future administrators are developed is to more thoroughly address and celebrate the aspects of diversity, equity and social justice.

To truly teach and lead educational leaders in California is to develop a more diverse leadership population, where students will be assured of seeing leaders who look like

them. It is well said that children and young adults consider the possibilities for themselves by the adults who are around them. If they fail to see a diverse group of leaders, especially as it pertains to leaders of color, a minority majority student population will also not take into consideration the positive prospect for their future.

Many in society and educational leadership consider the recognition of leadership diversity without equity as an appropriate and sufficient act. It is not.

Currently there is an opportunity to engage in mutual discussion in order to arrive at a new understanding of the process and theory of educational leadership, diversity and equity. The state of California and its school districts must resolve to address the issues of a lack of diversity and equity among educational leadership.

Each day I share, with anyone who will

By Kenneth Magdaleno

listen, that “The difference between diversity and equity is that diversity provides one with a place at the table, while equity provides one with a voice at the table.” Equity provides one with the voice and the power to effect change.

It is the point at which equity is reached and voice is present that diversity is appropriately celebrated as a preliminary step. Too often, diversity is seen or measured as the “end product” of meeting the needs of leadership, when in fact it is equity that should be viewed as the end product in the educational system. It is important to equip education leaders with the knowledge and skill to create a systemic response to the diverse levels of student needs in cross-cultural and multicultural settings. Doing so will create and deeply embed a culture of social justice and equity in schools and districts.

Equity is a social justice issue. As such, leadership, equity and social justice go hand-in-hand. Adams, Bell and Griffin (2007) wrote of social justice in education: “The goal of social justice education (and in turn, social justice leadership) is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society that is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure.”

Attending to the need for development of a diverse group of leaders and how meeting this particular need results in a more socially just and equitable leadership is the point of this article. Diversity is important, but it is not enough; equality is important, but it is not enough; equity is that place where all leadership must meet. Let us begin with diversity.

Diversity: A valuable starting place

According to the California Department of Education’s DataQuest staffing report, in 2014 there were a total of 24,634 administrators serving California schools. Of these, 35 percent were categorized as leaders of color: 21 percent Hispanic or Latino; 7 percent African American; .005 percent American Indian or Alaska Native; .04 percent Asian; .003 percent Pacific Islander; .009 percent Filipino; .03 percent no response; and 62 percent white. Five years previous, in 2008-09, there were a total of 27,950 school administrators, 33 percent of



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whom were leaders of color.

These figures note that the diversity of educational leadership in California does not mirror the student population, where 75 percent are students of color. Nevertheless, there is or should be a constant among educational leaders serving the educational system, and that is to do what is best for students.

Mahatma Gandhi said, “Mankind will endure when the world appreciates the logic of diversity.” There is a valuable starting place when one begins the conversation regarding diversity in leadership; that is to find something in common in order to begin to address differences. Leadership must begin at that place where student learning and success is primary, and a place at which all can begin to appreciate diversity and see it as something positive, not a deficit.

At the University of Oregon, where its Division of Equity and Inclusion is an important resource for students, there is the following Definition of Diversity: “The concept of diversity encompasses acceptance and respect. It means understanding that each individual is unique and recognizes our individual differences. These can be along the dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, political beliefs or other ideologies. It is the exploration of these differences in a safe, positive, and nurturing environment. It is about understanding each other and moving beyond simple tolerance to embracing and

celebrating the rich dimensions of diversity contained within each individual.”

Cultural philosopher Horace Kallen likened diversity to “groups of instruments – nationalities – playing their own separate parts while together making beautiful music resonant with harmony and good feeling...”

Leadership: Development of people

According to philosopher and activist Cornel West: “We need leaders ... who can situate themselves within a larger historical narrative of this country and our world, who can grasp the complex dynamics of our peoplehood and imagine a future grounded in the best of our past, yet who are attuned to the frightening obstacles that now perplex us. Our ideals of freedom, democracy and equality must be invoked to invigorate all of us...”

Educational leaders must continue to engage in mutual discussions regarding the development of people and programs that address social justice, educational leadership, diversity and equity. As leadership educator and social justice scholar Cynthia Gerstl-Pepin has explored, discourse regarding leadership development calls for moving beyond discussions of how the system works and what is wrong with it, to encompass discussions of how programs can provide the skills to be advocates for leaders of color and, in turn, underrepresented children, parents, teachers and communities.

For leaders of color, who have been involved in discussions over the years without a great deal of improvement in programs that

meet their needs, moving beyond discussions of how the system works to seeing the system change and work is the goal. As such, the matter of leadership and equity – or inequity – is a systemic issue. Too often the thought process among leaders is that if an organization begins by making small, quick changes they are meeting the “legal” requirements of leadership and equity, and fail to transform their thinking and methods of operation.

As is noted by Bradley Scott in writing of equitable learning, and which I have altered to include equitable leadership, systemic equity is defined as: “...the transformed ways in which systems and individuals habitually operate to ensure that every learner (leader) – in whatever learning environment that learner (leader) is found – has the greatest opportunity to learn enhanced by the resources and supports necessary to achieve competence, excellence, independence, responsibility, and self-sufficiency for school and for life.” This same definition, meant for student learners, is just as important and applicable for leaders.

Just as diversity and equity have impor-

tant differences, so do equity and equality. Quite often, there is a misunderstanding that as long as all are treated equally, their needs are being met. As is well known, equality and equity have a considerable difference. Equality means everyone receives the same thing; equity means that each person receives what he or she needs. Equality without equity fails to address the individual needs of leaders, students and communities and simply mirrors what has, and continues to occur in the educational system.

Understanding the difference

Over the years there has been an ongoing conversation at the state and school district level that educators need to become more aware of and celebrate the diversity of students. In the eyes of many, simply recognizing student and community diversity is an appropriate and sufficient act. As previously stated, the educational system must move “beyond diversity” and reach the level of equity. Having “voice” is not only equitable, it is the right thing to do. There is no one less than another.

Education leaders are meant to meet the

needs of all students, and all educational leaders must understand the difference between diversity and equity. The time to take action is past, there can be no excuses. No matter the definition of social justice, equity or diversity, the end result must be “praxis” or “intentional activism” as defined by Paulo Freire. It is time to be courageous in spite of the obvious barriers and move forward. As stated by organizational theorist Russell Ackoff, “The only thing harder than starting something new is stopping something old.”

Resources

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Kenneth Magdaleno is director of the doctoral program in educational leadership at Fresno State.