

Ross, J.A. & Berger, M-J. (2009). Equity and leadership: Research-based strategies for school leaders. *School Leadership and Management*, 29(5), 461-474.

Equity and Leadership:

Research-Based Strategies for School Leaders

Purpose

Demographic changes and increased public sensibility to the needs of the disadvantaged demand that school leaders include the equity agenda as a key component of the school's mission.

Educational equity means “raising the achievement of all students while narrowing the gaps between the highest and lowest-performing students; and eliminating the racial predictability and disproportionality of which student groups occupy the highest and lowest achievement categories”(Singleton & Linton, 2006, p.46). In this article we report the results of a literature review that investigated research on equity issues facing five student groups: special needs students; religious, cultural and racial minorities (including First Nations students and ELL - English Language Learners); groups disadvantaged by socio-economic status; gender groups; and students differentiated by their sexual orientations (Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, and Transgendered). Our purpose is to generate research-based strategies that school leaders can use to increase equity in their schools.

The article begins with a rationale for identifying research-based equity strategies. We provide a brief discussion of leadership styles, emphasizing that principals influence student achievement of disadvantaged groups by creating with staff an inclusive school mission. The next sections identify specific strategies within four domains that provide opportunities for school leaders to enhance equity: (i) curriculum interpretation, (ii) instructional practices, (iii) assessment and evaluation, and (iv) community involvement.

Background

Three factors speak to the need for research-based equity strategies. First, principals can have a substantial impact on how responsive their schools are to students who are members of disadvantaged groups (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006; Stanovich & Jordan, 1998). But there is variation in leaders' sensitivity to equity issues, the strategies they use to create an inclusive culture in their schools, and the outcomes of their actions. For example, Salisbury (2006) found that some principals focused on compliance with equity legislation while others went beyond compliance to express a moral commitment to equity. These differences in principals' beliefs were reflected in the equity climates of their schools.

A second reason is that many school leaders indicate that they had insufficient training on equity issues during their preservice leadership training (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006; Zaretsky, Moreau, & Faircloth, 2008). The populations of western democracies have been transitioning towards greater diversity in religious, cultural, and social identities. Principals may be assigned to schools that differ dramatically from the type of school they attended as students and in which they trained as teachers and administrators.

A third reason is that expectations about the responsibility of principals to create an inclusive culture are constantly evolving, identifying new tasks for a job that is packed with multiple responsibilities. Legislation and case law create new areas for principal monitoring of regulatory compliance (Cumming, 2008). Equity policies call for the principal, who has been portrayed as an agent of social reproduction (Riehl, 2000), to be a mediator of social change (Fullan, 2002).

Leadership Styles

The literature on leadership styles is vast, constantly expanding, and controversial. It is not our intent to review it here but in reviewing research on equity, we were struck by how

frequently the studies associated the ideals of equity with three overlapping conceptions of leadership. In (i) transformational leadership the principal is a facilitator of teacher growth. Such leadership enhances an organization by raising the values of members, motivating them to go beyond self-interest to embrace organizational goals, and redefining their needs to align with organizational preferences (Yukl, 2005). (ii) Distributed leadership is closely linked to transformational leadership in that empowerment of staff is the core mechanism for achieving goals and all staff exercise leadership functions (Harris, 2004). (iii) Instructional leadership refers to everything a principal does to promote student achievement: developing the school mission, coordinating and monitoring curriculum and teaching, promoting a climate for learning, and creating a supportive work climate (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). We found an explicit endorsement of leadership practices that shared leadership with others (transformational or distributed leadership) and which focused on instructional issues (instructional leadership).

Principals are held accountable for student achievement in their schools, even though the direct effect of principals on student achievement is near zero (Witziers, Bosker, & Kruger, 2003). Principals influence achievement indirectly by creating the organizational conditions through which improved teaching and learning occurs. If principals are to create inclusive schools in which the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged groups is shrinking, they need to involve their staff as partners in the improvement effort. Throughout this article, we refer to the principal as the key agent of equity implementation. Our strategies for equity leadership include all members of the school leadership team and in schools that have embraced transformational leadership styles, the leadership team includes every staff member.

Domain 1: Curriculum Interpretation

Strategy 1: Encourage staff to talk about issues of diversity, values, and social justice.

A core leadership task is visioning – working with members of the school community to develop a shared conception of the mission of the school. This educational mission generates the intended and unintended curriculum of the school and minority groups are disadvantaged when the intended and hidden curricula are misaligned (Cherubini & Hodson, 2008; Gilbert, 2004). Principals contribute to equity by establishing structures in which democratic discourse can take place. Staff may be uncomfortable discussing diversity, reluctant to acknowledge demographic changes, unwilling to recognize bias in teaching and assessment practices and resistant to student and parent concerns about fairness. Principals might establish a book club approach, in which staff reflect on their beliefs in the context of discussing texts that express the experiences of minority groups (McKenzie, 2004) or by reflecting on stories of children’s home literacy experiences collected through parent interviews (Danridge, Edwards, & Pleasants, 2000).

Strategy 2: Model equity beliefs for your school staff.

Principals’ attitudes toward equity impact teachers’ beliefs and practices, as well as influencing school policies. For example, principals with an inclusive approach to special education contribute to a school culture that (i) includes exceptional learners in a full range of academic as well as social activities, opting for integration of special learners into regular classrooms over withdrawal to segregated settings; (ii) holds high expectations for all students; (iii) provides scaffolding to enable exceptional learners to meet school standards; (iv) supports a consultative model of special education in which special education teachers partner with classroom teachers rather delivering instruction to individual pupils (Cook, Semmel, & Gerber, 1999; Praisner, 2003; Rea, McLaughlin, & Walther-Thomas, 2002; Stanovich & Jordan, 1998).

Modeling equity beliefs occurs through daily interaction with staff, students and parents.

Modeling includes a willingness to confront racist language (Henze, 2005). Ryan (2003) found that principals were reluctant to confront racial stereotypes held by students and teachers and treated stereotypes as faulty generalizations of no greater import than misconceptions about non-racial issues.

Strategy 3: Clarify misconceptions about equity issues.

A key leadership dimension is to provide intellectual support to staff. Although equity concepts could be represented in purely cognitive ways, they typically have a moral component. Consider the concept of inclusion. There is a shared understanding in equity research that inclusion means that all students should participate in all school activities. Less well understood is the moral dimension attached to the meaning: that inclusion is a fundamental right of all students; an entitlement, not a benefit bestowed through the benevolence of care-givers (Bailey, 2004). The breadth of inclusion also has a moral component: that it extends to all aspects of school life, academic and social, regardless of how difficult it might be to include all students in these domains.

A second core equity concept concerns student and teacher expectations about the beliefs and practices of particular social groups. For example, the young Muslim women in Zine's (2001) Canadian study said their teachers believed that education for women was not valued by Islam. This belief could be examined as an instance of faulty generalization; as Zine argues, Islam does not reject education for women. It could be analyzed as a stereotype, i.e., even if the generalization were true, it could not be validly applied to every Muslim and it is morally offensive to use the belief to limit children's educational opportunities. The example could also be used to investigate how language is used to sustain stereotypes about social groups. The

delicate balancing act for the principal is to promote valid generalizations about social groups without tripping the discussion into stereotyping. The key distinctions are that valid generalizations are based on credible data from representative samples and that variability within the group is recognized and valued. For example, females are more likely than males to fear snakes but there are female herpetologists.

A third equity concept is racism. School leaders tend to define racism as isolated acts of overt prejudice exercised by individuals, while racial minority students and their parents are likely to define racism as a collective attribute that is expressed covertly and indirectly (Ryan, 2003). These differences in defining racism can impede school efforts to establish trust with their communities.

A fourth equity concept is the deficit theory of diversity. Staff may attribute the underachievement of low SES students to such factors as parents being unable to provide out of school educational resources, economic stress impeding parents' ability to attend to their children's needs, and poorer families holding values and norms of behaviour that interfere with school success (Stout & Willms, 2002). Such beliefs absolve the school of responsibility for teaching all students. They also malign the cultures of others and may contribute to feelings of alienation if students feel their language and culture are not respected by the school.

Strategy 4: Create a safe, affirming school environment.

All students need to feel safe at school. Students who wear symbols of minority religious affiliation, especially Muslim students, have been subjected to abuse and challenge (Shah, 2006; Zine, 2001). So too, with gay students or students perceived to be gay (Mayo, 2007; McGregor, 2008). Principals can contribute to equity by creating support networks for sexual minority students and create "safe spaces" in the school for students to explore issues of sexual identity

(Mayberry, 2006). The challenge for school leaders is to develop strategies that move beyond legal compliance to create a genuinely affirming school environment in which all students feel welcome to participate in all activities. Students are more likely to develop a sense of belonging and identity with the school if they feel welcomed and valued (Ostermen, 2000). Leithwood, Jantzi and Haskell (1997) found that 46% of the variance in students' sense of belonging was attributable to instructional practices.

Instructional Practices

Instructional leadership is accomplished through: making the school's mission statement the foundation of classroom decision-making; creating and sustaining professional learning communities; bringing research-based instructional strategies into the school; providing support (especially in the form of release time) for teacher implementation of improvement practices; and monitoring instruction. Equity leadership draws on each of these strategies, adding distinctive elements to highlight inclusion goals.

Strategy 5: Enable teachers to provide students with the support they need.

Principals can contribute to equity by creating partnerships among classroom and special education teachers, instructional coaches and district consultants to create interventions that provide additional scaffolding for special needs students. These programs involve strategies to reduce cognitive load, compensate for language deficits, and/or address other sources of disability. Principals can contribute to equity by locating resources such as assistive technology, bringing in specialists to address infrequently occurring exceptionalities (e.g., deafness), coordinating preparation periods and allocating release time to enable staff to work together. Principals can facilitate access to instructional strategies in use in other schools by arranging visits to demonstration classrooms.

Similar leadership strategies can support teacher implementation of instructional supports for students of diverse races and cultures. Culturally responsive pedagogy involves inclusion practices in which teachers design lesson that (i) accommodate the attitudes, epistemologies, and ways of learning of diverse students; (ii) treat the customs and cultures of diverse groups as appropriate curriculum content; (iii) connect the formal curriculum to students' home experiences; (iv) vary instructional methods to accommodate multiple learning styles; (v) encourage student reflection on the role of schools in reproducing social hierarchies; and (vi) be advocates for students from all races and backgrounds (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Strategy 6: Provide all students with access to the whole curriculum

The needs of special learners are well met with adaptive instruction, which consists of focusing on time on task, direct instruction, phonics for entry level reading, and close pupil monitoring to align instruction with assessed needs (Jong, Houtveen, & Westerhof, 2002). But all students should have access to other instructional practices, particularly constructivist pedagogy that promotes deep conceptual understanding. Small and whole group classroom discussion enables students to share ideas, detect errors in their thinking, and elaborate their thinking. But students who have low status tend to talk less and are taken less seriously by their peers, depriving them of the benefits of classroom discussion (Esmonde, in press). A principal can contribute to equity by helping teachers acquire instructional strategies designed to overcome this problem, such as the status equalizing techniques of Cohen and Lotan (1995) or the generic prompts of King (1999) that enable silent students to become full participants in the discussion. Principals can also use school resources to equalize opportunity when students have differential access to home resources that complement in-school instruction, such as home computers (Lowe, Krahn, & Sosteric, 2003) and access to cultural facilities such as art galleries and museums.

Strategy 7: Recognize the potential for bias in special education identification

Students living in poverty and members of racial and cultural minorities are over-selected for tracks with low curricular intensity (Attewell & Domina, 2008) and for special education (Garcia & Cuellar, 2006; Zine, 2001). Assignment to special education gives students access to additional scaffolding but it can lead to unfairness if students are denied entry to a demanding curriculum. Principals can contribute to equity by helping teachers recognize bias during diagnosis, e.g., miscommunication due to differences in sociolinguistic style may be seen as language deficits (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005). Principals can help teachers recognize the influence of their beliefs and expectations on instructional decisions.

Strategy 8: Support research-based instructional practices

Several comprehensive school reform models, such as Success for All, reduce the black-white achievement gap (Borman, Slavin, Cheung, Chamberlain, Madden, & Chambers, 2007). Within-class grouping (Robinson, 2008) and student engagement in community improvement (Scales, Roehlkepartain, Neil, Kielsmeier, & Benson, 2006) are successful in schools serving disadvantaged populations. In addition to supporting teachers' access to instructional practices of demonstrated effectiveness, principals can contribute to equity by helping teachers prioritize recommended practices. For example, the effects of same sex schools and classes on student achievement are mixed (Salomone, 2006). Gender equity is more likely with strategies like reading circles designed to help boys find their literary identity (Cumming-Potvin, 2007). Principals can promote equity by encouraging teacher inquiry through emancipatory action research focused on teacher-identified problems (Reynolds, Harris, Clarke, Harris, & James, 2006), lesson study in which teachers construct instructional solutions to school learning problems (Lewis, Perry, & Murata, 2006), and participatory action research in which teachers

partner with external researchers to address an instructional problem of shared interest (Kemmis, 2006).

Assessment and Evaluation

Strategy 9: Install a system to monitor progress toward achievement gap reduction

A central characteristic of schools that consistently produce high achievement is that they are data-rich environments (Muijs, Harris, Chapman, Stoll, & Russ, 2004). They monitor pupil progress on an individual and school wide basis through the installation of data walls and electronic record keeping. An equity-based monitoring system aggregates individual data into meaningful categories that enable the school to track progress in reducing achievement gaps that are present in schools serving diverse populations (English & Steffy, 2001). Such tracking systems can provide information about the extent to which there are inequities in outcomes and about the effectiveness of diversity-based strategies. School leaders can contribute to equity by ensuring that tracking systems monitor diversity gaps and by establishing a forum in which group differences in outcomes can be addressed.

Strategy 10: Provide appropriate accommodations on assessments

The most frequently used accommodations (allowing more time and reading the items aloud) increase the validity and fairness of assessment (Sireci, Scarpati, & Li, 2005). Identifying appropriate accommodations is challenging: appropriate accommodations benefit disadvantaged students without inflating the performance of others (Koretz, 2008). Removing low frequency vocabulary and complex language structures is a valid accommodation strategy that improves performance of ELL students without affecting the performance of native speakers (Abedi, Hofstetter, & Lord, 2004). The principal can contribute to equity by helping teachers match student needs to particular accommodations, particularly when assessments are used to assign

students to programs that limit access to a challenging curriculum. In these conditions, provision of appropriate accommodations is a legal as well as an ethical requirement (Cumming, 2008).

Strategy 11: Discourage strategies that involve “gaming” the accountability system

Accountability systems contribute to equity by tracking progress in reducing achievement gaps attributable to race, culture, SES, language, ability and gender. Equity goals are frustrated if schools manipulate test procedures to inflate test scores. Booher-Jennings’ (2005) analysis of the Texas “miracle” found that the purported reduction in the racial achievement gap and steady increase in overall achievement over time was an illusion. A covert policy of excluding special needs, racial minority, and low SES students inflated state assessment scores, to the serious detriment of excluded students. Less dramatic forms of gaming include inappropriate test preparation practices, assignment of the most able teachers to grades exposed to mandated assessment, reductions in subjects not tested, and making invalid comparisons to buff the appearance of school results (Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008). Principals can contribute to equity by replacing gaming strategies with valid assessment practices that ensure that the equity benefits of accountability systems are realized.

Strategy 12: Celebrate all achievement gains.

Academic triage is the allocation of instructional resources to students who are close to passing mandated assessments while ignoring those who have little hope of meeting the standard (Booher-Jennings, 2005). Accountability systems that focus on a single achievement standard are particularly susceptible to academic triage. The consequences for those outside the small group of students immediately above and below the standard are negative (Koretz, 2008). Their needs are less likely to be addressed and their gains are less likely to be celebrated. Since many of the low achieving individuals and schools are members of disadvantaged minority groups, academic

triage is an equity issue. School leaders can contribute to equity by discouraging academic triage, particularly by celebrating students who make gains at lower levels, even though their achievement remains below the state standard.

Strategy 13: Increase the reliability of assessments for diverse student populations

Reliability refers to the consistency of an assessment. In accountability systems that track student progress over time, reliability is essential to ensure that any changes detected between one time and another are the result of a change in performance rather than changes in the test or the tester. Some of the best assessment tools (e.g., Running Records) are high inference measures that require substantial training if they are to produce consistent scores (Chapman, Tunmer, & Prochnow, 2001). Principals can contribute to equity by facilitating teacher access to such training by creating professional learning communities in which teachers collectively construct suitable tasks, develop rubrics, select anchor papers, assess students' work, and discuss their interpretations to develop a shared understanding across a division or school.

Strategy 14: Avoid cultural, linguistic, and gender bias in item writing

Authentic assessment means that classroom and external assessments embed cognitive tasks in real-world contexts that are meaningful to the learner. This desirable measurement strategy may expose students to items that reflect an unfamiliar environment. Students may perform poorly because they lack the cultural, linguistic, SES or gender knowledge to make sense of the assumptions of the item. Sophisticated statistical procedures (e.g., Differentiated Item Functioning) can detect when one student group unexpectedly performs at a lower level than another. Schools rarely have someone on staff with access to these statistical tools. Even if they are available, detection of a difference is only the first step: teachers have to figure out whether the item was biased or if it detected a genuine difference among groups (Zenisky,

Hambleton, & Robin, 2004). Principals can contribute to equity by enabling their staff to recognize flagrant bias: if it looks biased it probably is—simply replace the item with one that has greater face validity (Koretz, 2008). Principals can facilitate staff discussions in which claims of item bias are based on credible arguments about how an item might affect a particular group.

Community Involvement

Strategy 15: Recognize the expertise of parents and community members

A key impediment to equity is the adoption of deficit theories of student achievement, i.e., the attribution of students' inability to perform well in school to deficiencies of students' home, culture and religion, rather than acknowledging the responsibility of the school for reducing achievement gaps. School leaders can contribute to equity by overtly recognizing the social capital of the communities they serve. (Social capital is “the capacity of individuals to command scarce resources by virtue of their membership in networks or broader social communities” (Portes, 1998, p. 12). Social networks include parent-child, parent-other, and parent-school interactions.) Parents have expertise about ways of thinking and cultural knowledge that teachers can use to scaffold instruction. Principals can facilitate teacher access to parent expertise by asking parents to tell stories about their children's home literacy experiences or having students conduct home language interviews to capture elders' experiences and perspectives (Danridge et al., 2007). Principals might help staff recognize the expertise of members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered communities about student development of sexual identities that may be unfamiliar to school counselors and teachers (Weiler, 2004).

Strategy 16: Create partnerships with parents to support learning

In addition to communicating school policies to the home to reduce cultural gaps (Leo & Barton, 2006) and involving the community in the design of culturally responsive curricula (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008), principals can engage parents in home learning that supports school activities. Parents can be encouraged to read to their children in home languages (Peterson & Ladkey, 2007), provide help with homework (Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008) and counter negative, race-based expectations (Berry, 2008). Special effort is required to break down the barriers that limit conversations between the school and racial, cultural, and linguistic minorities (Jeynes, 2004; Lee & Bowen, 2006). Principals can also explore innovative approaches to school-community linkages such as service learning, in which students investigate issues affecting their communities and take actions to improve community conditions (Scales et al., 2006). School leaders can further contribute to equity by partnering with members of social service agencies that address issues such as poverty that negatively affect school success (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006).

Conclusion

Achievement gaps based on student diversity continue to be disturbingly large (Lee, 2004). Our review identified 16 research-based strategies that school leaders can draw on to improve equity of outcomes for all students. The unifying theme of these strategies is that principals' influence equity indirectly, by increasing the technical skills of staff, transforming their beliefs about equity, and strengthening school partnerships with parents and the community.

Districts play a key role in the implementation of school leadership equity strategies. First, districts can provide training for school leaders. Andrews and Ridenour (2006) found that a professional learning program for administrators focused on equity issues increased participants awareness of stereotyping, discrimination, and biased language. These attitudinal changes were

reflected in behavioural changes. Second, districts control resources (e.g., release time) that enable teacher learning. Third, districts can empower schools by removing structural impediments, such as tracking, that limit learning opportunities for disadvantaged minorities (Callahan, 2005).

Our final word is that principals need to recognize that schools are nested in a systemically biased society in which powerful forces support the existing hierarchy of social groups. Principals with a deep commitment to equity outcomes need to take a critical stance toward the extra-school forces that inhibit social justice and act as advocates for underprivileged students in the community beyond the school.

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