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Recommended Citation

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STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTIONS OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE LEADERSHIP IN A K-12 PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL IN NORTH CAROLINA

Kimberly M. Jones-Goods and Comfort Okpala

Abstract

The purpose of this instrumental case study was to explore stakeholders' perceptions of the culturally responsive leadership practices of charter school leaders. The goals were: (a) to explore how the school leadership team perceived culturally responsive leadership in a K-12 charter school in North Carolina, (b) to explore how teachers perceived culturally responsive teaching and learning in a K-12 charter school in North Carolina, and (c) to explore how parents perceived a culturally responsive home-school connection in a K-12 charter school in North Carolina. The participants were members of the school leadership team, teachers, and parents. Results revealed the school leadership team, teachers, and parents were unanimous in their belief that culturally responsive leadership created a sense of belonging for all stakeholders. The results suggest that charter school leadership should perform functions that include: (a) fostering a common view of the organization's vision and mission among all stakeholders or members of the group by modeling culturally responsive practices; (b) providing an equitable distribution of resources, professional development, and other opportunities to meet the needs of diverse students and their diverse teachers; and (c) providing conditions that allow teachers and parents to react to the learning needs of diverse students.

Introduction

Today's charter and public school leaders face an increase in the population of racially and ethnically diverse students and the continued adoption of Eurocentric curriculum, pedagogy, and leadership practices, which often causes them to struggle with meeting the needs of racially and ethnically diverse student populations. Sheridan (2006) found a cultural gap in many of the nation's schools and a growing number of educators who strived to serve students from cultures other than their own. In response to the dramatic demographic changes that have created culturally diverse schools in many areas of the United States, school leadership is challenged now more than ever to increase academic achievement and create inclusive and culturally responsive school environments for all stakeholders. While the practice of leadership in traditional public schools has emerged as a thread in the discourse on educational administration (Theoharis, 2007, 2008a, 2008b), the literature has yet to adequately address leadership within the context of charter schools.

In recent years, the number of racial/ethnic minority students entering charter schools has increased (Angrist, Pathak, & Walters, 2011; Zimmer et al., 2009). Charter schools are more racially segregated than are traditional public schools (Bifulco & Ladd, 2007). The NAEP (2011, as cited in Chudowsky & Ginsburg, 2012) data analysis showed student achievement is

roughly even overall, but Black and Hispanic subgroups performed significantly higher in charter schools than in regular public schools. It can be speculated that public schools are not responding to the cultural needs of these students, perhaps due to the lack of flexibility cited by many charter school advocates when discussing the rigid curricular structure of public school systems. The reality is charter schools are serving a higher percentage of racially and ethnically diverse students than are traditional public schools. With the increasing racial and ethnic minority student populations and the educational autonomy found in charter schools comes an opportunity to provide a different approach to education (Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, 2008).

Charter school leadership is limited in the literature. Due to the makeup of the student populations in charter schools, the leaders address the inequities found in traditional public schools, to avoid these same inequities in charter schools. The use of culturally responsive leadership practices is one way to address the growing RCELD (racial, cultural, ethnic, and linguistically diverse) student population in charter schools.

Context of Charter Schools

Charter schools and schools of choice were a part of a larger school reform of the 1980s. In order to address the issue of traditional public schools underserving a racially and ethnically diverse student population, some reformists looked to the creation of charter schools as the answer (Anyon, 2005; Finn, Manno, & Vanourek, 2000; Noguera, 2003; Payne & Knowles, 2009). Finn, Manno, Bierlein Palmer, and Vanourek (1997) reported:

> [Charter schools] respond to frustrations, demands, and dreams that the regular system - for whatever reason - is not satisfying. In that sense, they are consumer oriented, and their consumers include parents, voters, taxpayers, elected officials, employers, and other community representatives. (p. 488)

Charter schools, originally designed to provide school choice for parents and students, and to offer a competitive pedagogical edge over public schools (EdSource, 2013). As a result, charter schools have different regulations than traditional public schools (EdSource, 2013). This freedom may give insight into the overwhelming interest in charter schools, as 32 of the 37 states that adopted charter school legislation by 1999 reported over 2,000 of these schools remain in operation and are attended by roughly half a million students (Renzulli & Roscigno, 2005). Although the effectiveness of charter schools remains undetermined, these entities are as popular as they are contentious and operationally complex (Russo, 2013). Charter school proponents contend that the competitive pedagogical edge and the choices offered by these schools will force traditional public schools to improve their quality of curriculum. Charter school detractors are apprehensive that charter schools not only cause racial and economic segregation, they reduce resources that would otherwise be available to traditional public schools (Ertas, 2007). Charter schools are categorized as "semi-private" choice programs and are "neither clearly public nor clearly private" (Metcalf, Muller, & Legan, 2001, p. 4). Additionally, they have been characterized as "quasi-public schools" that straddle the boundary between public and private settings as they are operated by parents, community leaders, educators, and a host of others (Vergari, 1999, p. 389; Witte, 1996, p. 161).

The concept and first use of the term *charter* originated with a professor named Ray Budde in a conference paper presented in 1974 and later published in 1988 that suggested schools could conceivably create their goals and set their own policies. Small groups of teachers, Budde asserted, could be given contracts, or "charters," by their local school boards to explore innovative pedagogical techniques (Connor, 2011; Renzulli & Roscigno, 2005). This

concept was further expanded by the American Federation of Teachers president, Albert Shanker, in the late 1980s (Vergari, 1999). However, the first public charter school legislation was not introduced until 1991 in Michigan (Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools, 2013).

Charter Schools in North Carolina

The history of the North Carolina charter school movement dates back to 1996 when the General Assembly approved the Charter School Act (CSA), which allowed any individual or organization to apply for a school charter. Once the charter legislation passed in North Carolina, thousands of parents withdrew their children from traditional public schools and enrolled them in charter schools because they believed their children would be better served in a new, innovative environment (Lewis, 2009).

North Carolina's first charter school opened in the 1997-1998 school year (Bifulco & Ladd, 2007; Brown, 1999; McNiff & Hassel, 2002). North Carolina's original charter school legislation included a provision that capped the number of charter schools authorized by the North Carolina State Board of Education at 100 (Bifulco & Ladd, 2007; Brown, 1999; McNiff & Hassel, 2002). The charter school cap has since been lifted.

Critics envisioned that charter schools would lead to "cream skimming" and elitism and did not account for the Black and Hispanic flight from traditional public schools. Charter school students were expected to be the White, bright, and economically advantaged (Vergari, 1999). However, many racially and ethnically diverse parents who were dissatisfied with the traditional public school methodology of instruction chose charters as a means of providing an alternative to learning for their children. According to data from the National Study of Charter Schools from 1996 to 1998, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, on average, charter schools enroll a larger percentage (22%) of Black students than all public schools (16%; Vergari, 1999). The Center for Research on Education Outcomes (2013) at Stanford University published the National Charter School Study in which the executive summary reported that since 2009, the proportion of Hispanic students in charters has begun to approach the proportion of Black students. Charter schools enroll a lower percentage of White and Hispanic students and a higher percentage of Black students (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2013). North Carolina charter schools tend to follow the national trend of enrolling a higher percentage of Black students than traditional public schools (Noblit & Corbett, 2001). The percentage of Black students in North Carolina's charter schools (48%) is disproportionately higher than the percentage of Black students in North Carolina's public schools statewide (31%; Noblit & Corbett, 2001). The appeal of charter schools can be linked to the fact that these schools are allotted a certain degree of flexibility because they are not held to the state laws that govern local school districts (Dunklee & Shoop, 2006). Supporters of these types of schools are quick to point to the flexibility that enables these schools to be more innovative when it comes to addressing the needs of students (Hoxby & Rockoff, 2005).

According to NC Senate Bill 8/S.L. 2011-164, North Carolina limited the number of charter schools that could operate in the state to 100 until 2011 when the General Assembly lifted the cap. Currently, the law allows for varying levels of teacher certification at charter schools, while the previous bill required at least 75% of teachers to be certified in kindergarten through fifth grade and at least 50% in Grades 6 through 12. NC Senate Bill 337 removed those requirements and now requires at least 50% of charter teachers in North Carolina to be certified. NC Senate Bill 337 also requires that charter schools reasonably reflect the racial and ethnic composition in the areas in which they are located.

Charter School Leadership

For the purpose of this study, charter school leadership was defined as *school-based stakeholders*, which includes school leaders and teachers. These are the people who affect the development of school-based curriculum and make related decisions (Zhang, 2006).

Data Collection and Analysis

This qualitative case study involved three stakeholder groups from a K-12 public charter school in North Carolina, known as the CRC. The participants included three members of the school leadership team, three teachers, and three parents (See Tables 1 through 3).

Table 1
School Leadership Participants

ID#	Racial/Ethnic Identity & Gender	Education	Position at the CRC	Educational Experience	Years involved with the CRC
A	M Venezuelan	Master's School Administrator License	(K-12) ESOL Director	17 years	6
B	F Black	Master's in Counseling	Founding Member Student Services Director	17 years	17
C	F South African	Master's in Education	Teacher Leader English Teacher Grades 9-12	12 years	5

Table 2
Teacher Participants

ID#	Racial/Ethnic Identity & Gender	Education	Position at the CRC	Educational Experience	Years involved with the CRC
A	M Black	Master's in Education	Exceptional Children's Teacher (K-12)	5 years	5
B	M Black	Master's in Education	English Teacher High School, Grades 9-12	6 years	6
C	F Columbian	Master's in Education	Teacher, Middle School, Grades 6-8	14 years	5

Table 3
Parent Participants

ID#	Gender	Education	Active Volunteer at CRC	Number of Children Attending The CRC	Years involved with the CRC
A	F Mexican	GED Nurse Assistant	No, due to long work hours	1	5
B	F Biracial (Black and White)	Master's in Social Work	Yes	2	6
C	F Mexican	Did not complete high school or earn GED	No, due to language barrier	4	5

The purposeful selected participants included: (a) school leaders employed with the charter school for five or more years, (b) teachers employed with the charter school for five or more years, and (c) parents whose children attended the charter school for more than five years. The participants articulated their perceptions related to culturally responsive leadership; therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to all public or charter schools.

Data were collected from participants through a series of face-to-face focus group interviews with the participants and a December 2013 parent satisfaction survey. The focus group format was chosen in order to provide the participants more time to reflect and to recall on their experiences and to encourage reconsideration of previously mentioned points as their memories were spurred by the experiences of the other participants (Creswell, 2013; Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Each participant group participated in two tape-recorded sessions for approximately 30 to 60 minutes per session. The tapes were transcribed and interpreted into rich, thick narrative description. Member checking enabled each participant to review, check, and confirm the narrative data to provide measures of validity and reliability.

School Profile
This study was conducted in a K-12 public charter school in North Carolina with a population of approximately 450 students, comprising roughly 49% African American, 49% Hispanic, and 1% multiracial. The school founders believed the record of the conventional public school system indicated an alarming degree of neglect and a hindrance to racially, culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse (RCELD) students' preparation toward acquiring the skills necessary to become productive, successful, and fulfilled individuals. Having access as a charter school to the same funds as the regular public school system affords the CRC the direct opportunity to determine and influence the quality of education its students receive. The premise for the CRC was that it would provide students with a multicultural teaching staff who would not deny RCELD students the right to feel included in the school culture and to be taught in an environment that embraced them through teaching and learning. Human compassion has been the cornerstone for creating a learning community across race and culture at the school.

Research Questions

The participants were asked to respond to a series of questions that were guided by the central research question: How do stakeholders perceive culturally responsive leadership in the context of K-12 charter schools? The central research question was divided into three sub-questions:

1. How does the school leadership team perceive culturally responsive leadership in a K-12 charter school in North Carolina?
2. How do the teachers perceive culturally responsive teaching and learning in a K-12 charter school in North Carolina?
3. How do parents perceive a culturally responsive home-school connection in a K-12 charter school in North Carolina?

Results

The stakeholder groups provided valuable information regarding their perceptions of culturally responsive leadership in the charter school. Each participant provided a descriptive analysis of the factors he or she believed categorized the school leader as culturally responsive.

Responses to the study questions yielded several key findings, all of which point favorably to the presence and effectiveness of culturally responsive leadership at the CRC, making it a culturally competent school.

1. School leadership understands the unique needs of the population and designs policies to support them. The diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds of the administration enable them to have greater insight into the everyday lives of students and model culturally responsive practices for their staff.
2. Critical dialogues with school staff concerning race are highly proactive and encouraged. These conversations are considered productive in order for teaching staff to be more culturally responsive.
3. School staff embraces administrative feedback and use classroom observations and collaborative teaching as a means of strengthening the school culture and student success.
4. Collaboration among all school stakeholders is fostered. The school's open-door policy allows stakeholders to have greater accessibility to the school.
5. The home-school connection is a high priority; however, students know a lack of parental involvement is not a barrier to their success. Administrators see home-school communication as a means to increase student achievement.

Discussion

Research on charter school leaders revealed the importance of leadership skills in maintaining the academic and operational functions of the school (Zimmer & Buddin, 2007). School leaders who create a home-school connection and place culture and cultural responsiveness at the forefront of their goals are in the best position to enhance the academic achievement of their students (Van der Westhuizen, Mosoge, Swanepoel, & Coetsee, 2005). With the increasing racial and ethnic diversity in charter schools, it is important that the school leadership be culturally responsive and aware of the role culture plays in education. Charter school leaders must be able to model cultural responsiveness for their teaching staff and create professional development opportunities that support the desire of the teaching staff to use teaching strategies that support the academic success of all students. The leadership team must offer teachers an avenue to practice what they believe.

This research was conducted in an effort to explore stakeholders' perceptions of culturally responsive leadership in a K-12 charter school in North Carolina in terms of how the school leadership meets the needs of the racially/ethnically diverse student population; their influence and development on curricula and teaching methods; and the relationships between the school leadership team, teachers, and parents. Similar studies should be conducted surrounding the phenomenon of culturally responsive leadership in charter schools but researchers should have no expectation of reaching the exact findings revealed in this study. Not all stakeholders in public charter schools lived the same experiences.

Conclusions from Research Questions

"Culturally responsive leadership practices are those that help to empower diverse groups of parents and make the school curriculum more culturally responsive" (Johnson, 2007, p. 50). Because schools in the United States are largely congruent with middle-class, European values (Boykin, 1994; Nieto & Bode, 2012), the goal of culturally responsive leadership is to devise mechanisms and environments for others to experience the freedom to become their best selves (Davis, 2002).

The school leadership was unanimous in their belief that a culturally responsive leader establishes a welcoming and supportive school culture through instructional leadership and creates a sense of belonging for all stakeholders. School leaders must understand the current and historical events happening in the community and how the world influence the emotional, social, and academic needs of students (Cooper, 2009; Scribner & Reyes, 1999). The school leadership all felt their actions and implementation of a "no excuses" environment led to increased student achievement and a welcoming environment for all stakeholders.

Ladson-Billings (1995) asserted that culturally responsive teaching is "just good teaching" and teachers must continuously ask themselves "what does good teaching look like?" Teachers become culturally competent when school leaders model cultural responsiveness and the teachers can begin to understand how race, ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status, gender, residential status, and cultural experience influence student behavior and performance, as well as school climate (McKinley, 2010).

The sentiment expressed throughout the parent focus group interviews was that coming to a charter school meant becoming more connected with the school and moving away from the isolation felt at traditional public schools. Parents felt the CRC was the most responsive to parents by building on cultural capital, valuing the home lives of students, and welcoming parents into the school.

Summary of Findings

School leadership communicated high expectations consistently throughout the entire school, adhering to the belief that all students can meet achievement expectations based on a genuine respect for student culture and the belief that students do not rise to low expectations. In the classroom, teachers were expected to develop culturally relevant learning activities and teaching approaches to reach students in a range of culturally appropriate ways. School leaders encouraged teachers to learn more about the languages and cultures of their students as a means to advance academic learning success. Home-school partnerships were viewed as critically important to student engagement and success.

Findings from the focus group interviews revealed that the school leadership was unanimous in their belief that a culturally responsive leader established a welcoming and supportive school culture. The teachers' data show that culturally responsive instructional

leadership can lead to a sense of belonging for all stakeholders. Parental data vary on their views of culturally responsive home school connections. Parents, especially those of diverse cultural backgrounds, need to be educated about how they can assist in the educational process and be collaborative stakeholders in setting goals for their children's academic achievement.

The findings from this study show that culturally responsive leadership is essential ingredients in the education of minority students. The findings from this study have both policy and practical implications for both charter and non-charter schools.

Recommendations

With the increasing racial/ethnic minority student populations and the educational autonomy found in charter schools comes an opportunity to provide a different approach to education, and to infuse a cultural perspective into the curriculum (Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, 2008). As the charter school movement continues to grow nationally, frustrated and angry parents of racial and ethnic minority students no longer have to wait for public schools to get on board with innovative curriculum strategies. Charter schools afford these families an opportunity for students to leave traditional public schools in search of an educational environment that is more conducive to their learning.

Cultural responsiveness has become a trending topic in academic circles. Educational administrators who attempt to balance quality education with diversity (Lynch, 2011), may find this a complex, if not a daunting, task. However, as Ylimaki and Jacobson (2013) pointed out, if culturally responsive school leaders are to be successful, they must find ways in which to infuse the diverse aspects of students' home lives and communities into the curriculum. It is more important than ever that schools be equipped with leaders who are culturally competent and aware of their role in the education of a racially and ethnically diverse student population and have a commitment to collaborative and instructional leadership that serves their student population in culturally responsive ways. Such a goal requires understanding how school leaders as instructional leaders receive, comprehend, and either reject or incorporate culturally responsive practices into their developing teacher identities. The insight into this process comes through studies such as this, whereby researchers closely and carefully examine the perceptions, beliefs, understandings, experiences, and development of cultural responsiveness in schools.

Sleeter (2011a, 2011b) stated many studies illustrate culturally responsive pedagogy in practice, sometimes going under different terms such as multicultural teaching, equity pedagogy, sociocultural teaching, or social justice teaching. However, very few studies illustrate culturally responsive leadership as perceived by stakeholders in a charter school. Cultural responsiveness makes it important for school leadership to model and facilitate critical discussions on race, equity, privilege, and bias. Singleton and Linton (2006) and Cooper (2009) recommended leaders talk about these issues in staff meetings, parent meetings, leadership team meetings, and staff development in order to provide support and encouragement to make curriculum, instruction, student engagement, and family partnerships culturally responsive.

Recommendations

This work adds to the limited research base on culturally responsive leadership in charter schools and racial/ethnic parents' concerns regarding the curriculum and pedagogical practices of traditional public schools that helped propel the flight of their children from traditional public schools into charter schools. Further research is indicated in the area of identifying and dismantling the hidden curriculum; that is, "all of the unrecognized and sometimes unintended knowledge, values, and beliefs that are part of the learning process in schools and classrooms"

(Horn, 2003, p. 298). This study was only a small step toward progression to encourage more in-depth studies. More studies are needed to inform the practices of school leadership in charter schools, political leaders, policy makers, social reformers, and the families of charter school students.

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