

Culturally Competent Leadership through Empowering Relationships: A Case Study of Two Assistant Principals

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The student population in the United States is growing in diversity (Frankenburg & Lee, 2002; Orfield & Lee, 2004; Tefara, Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Chirichigno, 2011), challenging school leaders to develop or fine-tune their cultural competence in order to meet the needs of the changing student population (Bustamante, Nelson, & Onwuegbuzie, 2009). As a result, expanding knowledge of cultural competence is necessary for school leaders as a way to meet state and federal requirements for student subgroups and to meet new credentialing standards for school leaders (ISLLC 2015 Standards Draft Version; Oregon Department of Education Summit on Cultural Competence, 2004; VA Guidelines for Uniform Performance Standards and Evaluation Criteria for Teachers, 2011). This is especially important for assistant principals who must navigate the new terrain of school leadership while working to understand students who may not come from the same cultural background (Madhlango & Gordon, 2012).

Through a descriptive case study (Merriam, 1998), this project examines the experiences of two assistant principals, one from an elementary school and one from a high school, who worked as part of a leadership team that increased academic achievement in their diverse schools. The study addresses the following question: How do school assistant principals working at a school with a demonstrated record of success in student achievement, lead schools in culturally competent ways through intentional and enhanced relationships with students? The primary case unit of analysis is the assistant principals, but interviews with teachers and principals provide further confirmation to support the evidence from the assistant principals. Findings indicate that assistant principals can have a positive impact through discipline and community actions. Assistant principals acknowledge that mentors who are deliberate in their work in schools with students of poverty combined with their own personal experiences as teachers is crucial to the decisions they make when interacting with students and their families.

Introduction

Increasingly, as the demographics of United States schools change, the recognition of the importance for culturally competent leadership through empowering relationships with students has emerged in K-12 educational communities. According to the National Center for Cultural Competence, this competency requires organizations to, “have a defined set of values and principles, and demonstrate behaviors, attitudes, policies, and structures that enable them to work effectively cross-culturally” (1989).

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2011) indicated that of the 49.5 million children enrolled in United States K-12 schools, 52% were White; 24% were Hispanic; 16% were Black; and 5% were Asian. As demonstrated by the 2010 Census, the Hispanic population within the United States has grown exponentially in the last several decades. High birth rates and increased immigration have contributed to this growth. Hispanic enrollment in public schools tripled between 1968 and 2004 and is projected to be 30% of enrolled students by 2023 (NCES). During that same period, the Black student population increased by 30% and the White student population decreased by 17% (Frankenburg & Lee, 2002; Orfield & Lee, 2004). By 2050, the number of Latinos and Asians in the United States is anticipated to triple, and the number of African Americans is estimated to grow nearly 2 %. With our nation’s children, we expect a similar trend and by 2050, the numbers of students of color in the U.S. will likely jump from 44% to 62% (Tefara, Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Chirichigno, 2011). Additionally, our school aged children who are categorized as Limited English Proficient has grown and is expected to continue to rise.

This increase in diversity increases the urgency for culturally competent leadership by current and future school leaders (Bustamante, Nelson, & Onwuegbuzie, 2009). Scholars have emphasized the importance of leaders understanding school culture in a way that allows them to influence instruction and create a sense of personal safety and value (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Fullan, 1991; Sergiovanni, 2001). As students feel a sense of belonging, emerging research shows that progress can be made in student performance (Brooks, Jean-Marie, Normore, & Hodgins, 2007; Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Theoharis, 2007). As state and federal reporting systems require disaggregation and public reporting of academic results, school leaders have begun to face increased scrutiny about subgroup performance. Despite this focus on academic results, there is less focus on areas that are not monitored. For example, disaggregation of student discipline issues and consequences, if not required, is less often examined in schools, at either a school or teacher level. Cultural competence is embodied by a developmental process of assessment, awareness, reflection, and action experienced at both the individual and organizational levels.

As the emphasis on and research support grows in regard to culturally responsive teaching and culturally competent leadership, educator evaluation systems are being updated to address these performance areas. For example, the Commonwealth of Virginia approved new performance standards for principals in 2012. In an examination of the language utilized in that document, it is clear that a collaborative approach that considers stakeholders is expected, and cultural competency is specifically mentioned. In the Virginia Guidelines for Uniform Performance Standards and Evaluation Criteria for Teachers, standard 6.4, it is stated, “The principal models professional behavior and

cultural competency to students, staff, and other stakeholders” (Virginia Department of Education, 2011). The revised standards call for principals to evaluate their performance in a self-assessment or with an external evaluator through site visit/informal observation, goal setting, and a portfolio/document log.

Oregon is a state where, with support of the Wallace Foundation, cultural competence has been embedded into the standards for aspiring educational leaders. Educational leaders in Oregon are expected to “demonstrate the capacity to value diversity, engage in self-reflection, facilitate effectively the dynamics of difference, acquire and institutionalize cultural knowledge, adapt to the diversity and the cultural contexts of students, families, and communities they serve, and support actions with foster equity of opportunity and services” (Oregon Department of Education, 2004). Similarly, the NEA called for educators to demonstrate four skills related to cultural competence: “valuing diversity, culturally self-aware, understanding the dynamics of cultural interactions, and institutionalizing cultural diversity and adapting to diversity” (2008, p. 1). Finally, the ISLLC (Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium) Standards are under revision in 2014 and include an emphasis on cultural competence and the engagement of families. The 2008 standards are being updated to include creating a “community of care for all students”, “communities of engagement for families”, and “equity and cultural responsiveness” (ISLLC 2015 Standards Draft Version). As both these national and state initiatives begin to explicitly require cultural competency skills and training for leaders, it will be important to understand how best to assess the performance of principals in this area and the impact of those skills on overall student performance and school climate. The evaluation systems in place have not been utilized with enough consistency over a long enough period of time to understand the effectiveness of the measures. The varied nature of these systems between states will make that work challenging.

Educators in the United States have a legal and ethical obligation to maximize the level of equity and equality of opportunity for all students, due in part to legislation such as Title I and IDEA, as well as ethical expectations of the profession (Lashley, 2007; Shapiro & Stepkovich, 2010; Stepkovich & Shapiro, 2003). Specifically, we must seek to understand the role building or school leadership plays in effecting student academic and behavioral performance. According to Leithwood, Louise, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004), “leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school” (p. 5) and “is widely regarded as a key factor in accounting for differences in the success with which schools foster the learning of their students” (p. 17). Throughout the history of American public schools, there have been many changes in the demographic profile of enrolled students. Schools have often relied on studies, such as the well known and highly debated Coleman Report (Coleman, 1966), to offer explanations for poor student performance. The Coleman Report pointed to the insurmountable socioeconomic and familial factors at play in student performance. The report was used to mitigate the effects of student funding, curriculum, and teacher quality on student performance, while pointing to a student’s socioeconomic factor as the primary force behind attainment. If we can ascertain that a school leader’s cultural and contextual competence can assist in mitigating those effects, and understand opportunities to scale up those efforts, great gains are possible (Scheurich, Skrla, & Johnson, 2000).

While the influence of school leaders on student performance has been examined, there is less research about the potential influence of assistant principals. For many who begin the role of assistant principal, it is their first administrative role, and for some, it is their first experience outside of their classroom. While most assistant principals will have undergone traditional leadership preparation programs that include an administrative internship, these internships are often only one-semester and can be inconsistent in quality (SREB, 2005) and may not include any direct and explicit instruction or opportunity to discuss issues of social justice and cultural competence. Further, the initial experience as an assistant principal can vary, as evidenced by the variety of descriptions of the assistant principal and their role in the literature. Assistant or vice principals have been described as “neglected actors” (Hartzell, 1993); “forgotten leaders” (Cranston, Tromans, & Reugebrink, 2004); and “caretaker of the building” (Koru, 1993). It is clear, however, that assistant principals are often highly visible to students as they are delegated discipline and supervisory roles that bring them in frequent contact with students.

For administrators, negotiating today’s education policy environment requires them to have the ability to stay current with rapidly changing local, state, and federal expectations and also be aware of how those expectations will be carried out in their own buildings. Assistant principals are faced with a greater challenge by trying to figure out how to fit in as a school leader as they are learning to lead while at the same time trying to equalize educational outcomes. The role of the assistant principal is largely defined by principals burdened by other pressures or, at times, threatened by the assistant principal, thus widening the gap between what an assistant principal wants to do and is able to do (Karpinski, 2008). According to Williams (2012), “...little is known about which skills and dispositions enable assistant principals to carry out disciplinary tasks most effectively. This lack of knowledge makes it difficult to identify individuals who are well or poorly suited to become assistant principals, and to provide the necessary training that prepares them to do the task well” (p.93). Ensuring an equitable educational environment in the largely vague role of assistant principal is made more difficult by the undefined responsibilities of this job that finds the school leader not yet tasked with leading a school, and no longer part of the building teaching corps. In addition, research regarding the ways in which individuals in the role of assistant principal are prepared to assume the role of principal is limited; most research is regarding the mentorship of principals (James-Ward, 2012; Parlyo, Zepeda, & Bengston, 2012).

For assistant principals new to their roles, their aspirations of helping to lead a school and providing an equitable education for all students can quickly diminish when the weight of the reality of the position is combined with district outcomes that weaken policies aimed at equalizing educational outcomes for students (Trujillo, 2012). Nonetheless, where there exists an assistant principal with enthusiasm to ensure educational parity for students, it is important to recognize and harness this enthusiasm because of the ways in which the demographics of student populations are changing. As suggested by Madhlango and Gordon (2012), “the majority of principals and teachers of culturally diverse students do not come from the same cultural backgrounds as they do, and a number of studies over the past decade indicate that students’ school performance may be linked to lack of congruence between students’ cultures and the norms, values, expectations, and practices of schools” (p. 178). The weight of this responsibility is

enormous, and in order to succeed in fulfilling a mission of equity, a strong support system for assistant principals needs to be established to ensure success. This paper attempts to unpack some of the challenges faced by new assistant principals through an analysis of current research regarding education policy initiatives aimed at fostering the leadership of assistant principals with the goal of educational equity for all students.

Educational leaders, and perhaps particularly assistant principals who engage in much of the direct student contact via discipline and other activities, stand to exert tremendous influence on the educational outcomes of students. Questions arise for educational leaders in the area of diversity. What are educational leaders at the building level doing to ensure high quality programs and teachers for all students? What can educational leaders do to ensure that school segregation within the school building through tracking and student identification processes is diminished and how do we professionally prepare leaders for that work?

Given that leaders do have a key ability to foster change within their schools, they must be able to monitor the impact of diversity on student outcomes and facilitate measures to maintain conditions which lead to the highest benefit for students. This is particularly challenging given the myriad definitions and conceptualization of what constitutes culture and how that manifests in schools (Brooks & Miles, 2010). As we examine ways to assess principal and assistant principal performance in the dimension of cultural competence in a valid and reliable fashion, as well as develop curricula and practical experiential opportunities for aspiring leaders, we can learn much from principals who have demonstrated success in improving academic achievement in schools with historically underserved and underperforming populations. Specifically, what actions do they take to ensure an organization that is culturally competent and how do they engage their assistant principals in this effort?

Research Design and Study Context

As cultural competency understandings and importance grow in education, infrastructures and mechanisms are needed to both assess current principal and assistant principal performance and prepare aspiring leaders for culturally competent leadership through their impactful relationships with students. The specific aim of this project was to conduct a descriptive case study (Merriam, 1988) to provide a rich and multi-faceted understanding of two assistant principals (one elementary and one secondary) who have, in conjunction with their leadership teams, led their schools to improved student achievement with historically underserved and underperforming populations. The research question addressed in this project and study was: How do school assistant principals, working at a school with a demonstrated record of success in student achievement, lead schools in culturally competent ways through intentional and enhanced relationships with students?

Guided by Merriam's case study (1988) methodological approach, the research team conducted a descriptive case study at two public schools (one secondary and one elementary). These sites were selected based upon student achievement data in concert with a demographic analysis for historically underserved and underperforming students. Specifically, the assistant principals had been at their schools for at least five years, the schools had a greater than 75% minority racial population, coupled with a stronger pass

rate than both district and state averages on the state mandated accountability measure in Reading and Mathematics. The principals of both schools were also in leadership at the school for at least five years. The case study, however, was focused on the role of the assistant principals and levers those individuals used in the overall effort to support student learning.

Site Descriptions

Both schools were located in urban areas with a diverse economic setting, including industries related to national defense, higher education, transportation, and hospitality/tourism. While an elementary and high school were selected, the elementary school studied was not a “feeder” school to the high school as they were in separate communities.

² **Grantwood Elementary School.** Grantwood Elementary School provides educational services to approximately 625 students in grades Pk-5 with one principal and one assistant principal. Eighty-five percent of the students who attend are eligible for free/reduced priced lunches and are racially represented by approximately (3 year averages) 78% Black, 12% White, 6% Hispanic, and 4% Other. From 2011-2014, all teachers in the school are identified as highly qualified according the federal standards and nearly 50% held advanced degrees. The school building was originally constructed approximately 75 years ago, however, there have been construction projects that have updated aspects of the interior and added on to the exterior. There is a community history to the school with some multigenerational families who have attended. When one visits, the pride in the history of the school and facility is evident from comments and events that honor both. Grantwood was selected for this study because it has maintained test scores for Black students that are higher than both district and state averages for all schools on state mandated assessments, and particularly high for schools with similar demographics, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Grantwood Elementary Pass Rates for Black Students.

	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2011-	2012-	2013-
	English	English	English	2012	2013	2014
				Math	Math	Math
School	81	65	65	50	54	71
Pass Rate						
District	75	50	52	45	47	53
Pass Rate						
State Pass	80	59	59	52	55	60
Rate						

Note. Declining English scores from 2011-2012 to 2012-2013 can be attributed to changes in standards assessed and new assessment methods.

Simmons High School. Simmons High School provides educational services to approximately 1870 students in grades 9-12 with one principal and four assistant

² Pseudonyms are used for both school names and participant names to protect anonymity.

principals. Eighty-two percent of the students who attend are eligible for free/reduced priced lunches and are racially represented by approximately (3 year averages) 76% Black, 20% White, 3% Hispanic, and 1% Other. From 2011-2014, all teachers in the school are identified as highly qualified according the federal standards and nearly 48% held advanced degrees. The school was built 25 years ago and has had no major renovations since that time. When the school was originally constructed, it combined several different communities and demographic groups which presented initial challenges to early administrative teams. It appears now that the school has a brand and identity of its own that is evident in the markers of school pride one sees and hears when visiting. Simmons was selected for this study because it has maintained test scores for Black students that are higher than both disitric and state averages for all schools on state mandated assessments, and particularly high for schools with similar demographics, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Simmons High Pass Rates for Black Students.

	2011-2012 English	2012-2013 English	2013-2014 English	2011- 2012 Math	2012- 2013 Math	2013- 2014 Math
School Pass Rate	93	89	91	63	68	73
District Pass Rate	85	62	65	49	55	62
State Pass Rate	80	59	59	52	55	60

Note. Declining English scores from 2011-2012 to 2012-2013 can be attributed to changes in standards assessed and new assessment methods.

The research team, during the full scope of this study, utilized multiple sources of data including: student learning data, attendance data, student behavioral data, interviews with principal, assistant principal(s), and teachers, document analysis (including the school vision, handbook, and newsletters), and the assistant principal’s portfolio for summative evaluation. Data were maintained and analyzed using Atlasti software beginning with emic coding processes and then etic coding processes using existing literature regarding cultural competence. Data were first analyzed within case, and then a comparative case analysis was conducted. The research team also maintained analytic memos to debrief after interviews were conducted.

Findings

The assistant principals who participated at each of these schools were the primary case unit of analysis. By interviewing and examining student-learning data in connection with interviews and documents, we were able to determine key themes regarding the role of assistant principals in working with historically underserved students. The principals and teacher interviews provided important corroboratory evidence to the stories shared by the assistant principals themselves. First, several stakeholders saw discipline and school

community interactions as the most important and prevalent opportunity for the assistant principals to "make a difference" for students. Second, the assistant principals both acknowledged the critical importance of mentors who were intentional about the need to serve students of color who were living in poverty, which they believed, caused them to focus on these issues more deliberately. Finally, both assistant principals often referenced their prior teaching experience as rationale for decisions made and interactions with students and families.

Participants

It was important to gain a deep understanding of the two participants in this study, both as they described themselves, as well as how others described them. Sue, the assistant principal at Grantwood, was in her sixth year as assistant principal at that school and all six years were under the leadership of the same principal. Sue taught for eight years before obtaining her Master's degree and licensure in Administration. The position at Grantwood was obtained on her third attempt at an open position. Sue describes herself as a servant leader (Greenleaf, 1970) in that she views herself as focused on the needs and well-being of all in her school community to include support staff, teachers, parents, and in particular, children. Both her principal and the five teachers interviewed at her school discussed her commitment to accessibility. One teacher said, "Sue is everywhere. Anytime anyone is looking for her, she appears, and the kids really pick up on that. They know her and importantly she knows each of them and it shows." The principal described Sue as someone who has taught her a great deal. She said, "Sometimes I find myself so focused on the mechanics of the school day and when Sue started here, she came in really focused on the people. That taught me a great deal. Reminded me, really, of what counts."

The assistant principal at Simmons was Jeremy, who had been in the role for eight years. The principal of the school had been there for fifteen years. The other three assistant principals were all relatively new to the school with experience ranging from first year to three years. Jeremy attended a doctoral program in leadership preparation that emphasized social justice beginning with his recruitment and admission and through the dissertation process. As such, he referenced that program in the interview. Additionally, several of the five teachers interviewed made mention of his doctoral work indicating that he shared his work and experience with those around him. Jeremy was also a graduate of the school district and, as such, was a source of pride for the community. The principal commented that Jeremy was highly regarded by not only those in his building, but also those in the school district at large. He laughed when he said, "I know they are coming for him soon to be a principal, and I am happy for him, you know. But, how do we replace him? I hate to see him go, even though I want that for him."

As we examined data about the schools, we focused particularly on where the assistant principal role was described and three main themes emerged from both our within and cross-case analysis. Perhaps not surprisingly, given prior research, both assistant principals shared similar foci on issues for children from historically underserved demographic groups. It was evident through the interviews with principals, assistant principals, and teachers that this went beyond rhetoric for both assistant

principals and was something they were deliberate about in their daily work. The three main themes are explored in the next section.

Assistant principal-student interactions. Through examination of all data sources, it was clear at both schools that the discipline process was largely exercised through the assistant principal(s) at the school. At Grantwood, all discipline for all grades was conducted by the assistant principal, with the exception of what the principal called “serious violations” which were handled by both administrators. At Simmons, each grade level was supported by one assistant principal and that person then looped with the grade until graduation. Jeremy was responsible for discipline for seniors in the year he was interviewed.

Both assistant principals discussed the important opportunity they saw through their role as the disciplinarian of the school. While both addressed the need for improved preparation for teachers in classroom management to avert student issues, they did discuss that some offenses warranted a deeper administration involvement. They saw these one-to-one conversations with students as teaching opportunities and openings to connect with students who were struggling, rather than a simple disposition of the case and assignment of a consequence. Jeremy mentioned that he saw his role as that of a counselor in discipline situations and viewed discipline conversations as an opening to identify the deeper issues being experienced by the student. He shared,

This is my opportunity to get at the ‘why’ and give the student a voice to express those peer, family, and social issues that so often undergird behavioral challenges. I have heard students really open up in our conversation about the connection between their struggles and the reason they are in my office in the first place. So it has to be deeper than you did this and this is the consequence. It has to be about what got you here, how we change the challenges you are facing, and if we can’t change those, how do we change your response next time and going forward.

It was interesting to note the similarity in response from Sue when she noted in her interaction with her elementary students,

I have to know who they are as individuals. I want to know their families and what home is like and that helps me know how to approach them in these tough situations. It doesn’t work to do this one size fits all model. Each interaction I have with a child is a learning opportunity for him or her and that’s important to me.

The discussion around discipline also raised specific comments from the assistant principals, principals, and teachers interviewed regarding the equity issues the assistant principals sought to address through data disaggregation. In both schools, the assistant principals were encouraged by the principals to maintain data about referrals and consequences and to disaggregate them by race, gender, and disability status. These findings were shared in different forums in each school, but were shared with all teachers. Alongside conversations about student academic performance, these data discussions about behavioral data were powerful for teachers, especially when the process was new or for teachers newer to the school. One second year teacher who worked with Jeremy indicated,

I arrived here last year and at the end of our first marking period, we had this meeting and out came the numbers by teacher about the referrals. At first I was offended, but then I thought, did I really refer only boys? That can’t be right. It

was like a switch went off and I attended to it completely differently from that day forward. It wasn't about the numbers or what I wanted my colleagues to think about me; it was about is what I am doing with kids the right thing. Jeremy helped me see that.

For other teachers, the "reality check" as one referred to it, was not received as positively. She said, "Look I like Sue, but this idea of publicly shaming me for the kids who act up in my class doesn't work well with me. The reality is it is the boys and honestly the boys with bad homes who are the ones who cause problems." Sue mentioned in her interview that some of the teachers were not comfortable with the approach, but that her principal supported it. She said, "I am comfortable with their discomfort. If it leads to conversation and change, then discomfort is part of the process. Pretending like these issues aren't there does not help us take a step forward." The importance of using discipline as a teaching moment was emphasized, but it was also clear that the assistant principals credited their ability to act to the mentor they had as a principal.

Assistant principal mentor influence. Both assistant principals referenced the support, leadership, and mentorship of their principals in the interviews. Both discussed feeling as though they had a role model and importantly, that they were supported in their efforts to work with children who historically may have been overlooked. Both also discussed their sense of entitlement about their situation by referencing colleagues who were assistant principals where they did not feel a similar level of support. Sue indicated,

I am almost hesitant to share my experiences with my colleagues who work for principals who are not as supportive. I feel like I won the lottery. I can't imagine how hard this job and the work would be if I did not have the support I do. And I've heard it from friends who are in tears because they try to make a difference and hit a brick wall with their principals.

Jeremy, similarly, discussed feeling a stroke of luck through his placement with his principal. He discussed how much he had learned and how free he felt to try things, even if he did not succeed. He also indicated, however, that at his district wide assistant principal meetings, there was not consistency in that type of experience. He said, "I am seeing what a difference the administrative team concept can make. When we work together, it gels. In places where you don't hear and see that, it shows in their data and in their community reputation." As such, both assistant principals felt their capacity to support students in need was encouraged and supported by mentors positioned to influence that process.

Assistant principal socialization through teaching. The final area where there was consistency with the assistant principals was in their reference to their own teaching experience and how that influences their work with students and teachers. Their experiences, though, were quite different. Sue taught second and third grade for eight years and indicated she thought that gave her credibility with the teachers in pedagogy and content. She was able to leverage this credibility in conversations about how to support struggling students. Sue said, "I can walk in and know the instructional piece and the teachers seem to respect that, but it allows us to go deeper in our conversations about what is happening with the kids. They know I've been there and I can use examples from kids I taught when I work with teachers." Sue also said she used the same experience working with kids. "I loved all my babies. And that doesn't stop because I am an assistant principal. I just have more babies to love and care for." Jeremy was an English teacher

for tenth graders for six years and used much of his experience as a teacher in working with his students as an assistant principal. He said,

It's no different than teaching. I always start with the end in mind and say what is my objective from this conversation. I used to do that with a novel...what do I want the kids to know and understand and how will they show me that? It is the same thing with a kid who is struggling with bullying for example. What do I need this child to know and walk away with...what is the end goal?

Jeremy and Sue both saw their teaching experiences as paramount to their preparation for school leadership, but both also said the year they felt they transitioned was year five. Both said after that time, they would have felt ready for the work as an administrator. Jeremy also intends to ask his principal for permission to co-teach with an English teacher one class a year. He said, "Even those of us now in administration who taught need to be reminded. We need to spend time in the classroom as a teacher, not as a disciplinarian or an evaluator or a critic. As a teacher. This is important to me and to my ability to maintain connections to the kids in this building."

Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusions

This small study consisting of a case study with two assistant principals provides an understanding of how two school leaders have interjected their daily work with a purposeful attempt to support struggling students. Although the assistant principals did not specifically reference it about themselves, it was clear that both are keenly aware of their own privilege, and the deep professional responsibility they carry to support those who may not have that same access. Horsford, Grosland, and Gunn (2011) discussed the connection between one's personal journey and one's professional path. It was clear for these assistant principals that the personal journey included an absolute commitment to ferret out discrepancies in equity within their school in both academic efforts, as well as behavioral issues. Ladson-Billings, similarly, in 1994 discussed six tenets of culturally relevant teaching that have clear connection to what was learned about the school leaders in this study. The six tenets include: high self-esteem and regard for others; membership in a community and expectations that others do the same; see teaching as an art; help students make learning relevant and connected to their own lives; inherent belief that all students can be successful; and viewing teaching as a way to give students an opportunity to discover for themselves what they hold inside them. While this work was focused on culturally responsive teaching, it can be aligned to the descriptions offered of the efforts of the two assistant principals.

As these assistant principals used discipline, the support of mentors, and their own teaching background as levers to support the work in equity both valued, there are opportunities for future studies to extend that work. First, additional case studies of successful assistant principals might elucidate more about how and why they do what they do. Additionally, looking at the pairing of assistant principals with principals and leadership teams might provide a model for school districts. Turnover in teaching and leadership in high minority and high poverty schools is an ongoing challenge, but much could be learned from what occurs when the team works rather than just examining individual performance. Next, researchers need to consider the influence of the principal on the development and efficacy of the assistant principal and explore this through both

quantitative and qualitative studies. While some literature supports the importance of this role, more evidence is needed if recommendations are to be made to school district about how best to prepare principals to support assistant principal development.

A few recommendations, that are emergent given the nature of this research methodology, can be made for both school districts and leadership preparation programs. As we look at leadership preparation, there are three main recommendations that emerged from this study. First, programs need to engage in the work of understanding cultural competence in a deliberate and overt manner. The notion that this will be as effective if the programs make assumptions about how their aspiring leaders come to these understandings organically as opposed to engaging in conversations to unearth assumptions and address the personal journey is flawed. Specifically, that Jeremy was in tune with his own journey, as well as attentive to the communities and families in the community he served, was clearly connected to the direct involvement in these conversations in his preparation program. Second, programs need to consider determining how to engage in preparation for the diverse positions their graduates will hold. While programs sometimes use the term “principal preparation program”, graduates are likely to engage in the work of central office or assistant principal first. As such, programs could use existent curriculum in instructional leadership or curricular development and attempt to help program students see the connection to these issues through myriad lenses of different positions. While a principal might think of instructional leadership through evaluation of teaching, how will an assistant principal experience that in the roles they commonly hold in discipline and management? Finally, preparation programs may want to consider including self-advocacy skills to empower new administrators to communicate with supervisors. The examples shared by Sue and Jeremy of colleagues struggling to work with principals highlighted a need to support development in the difficult conversations with teachers, parents, students, and those in supervisory lines.

School districts may also want to consider how best to support assistant principals through induction and mentoring. This work must go beyond the managerial topics of procedures and protocols and include ongoing conversations about how to utilize data to inform instructional changes as a leader. Both assistant principals in this study were adept at navigating, not data awareness, but data use. Both felt like they learned that in their preparation programs and from their principals, but were seeking more support at the district level.

Additional research will also be beneficial in this area. Future plans include expanding the work to understand more about the overall school through an equity audit (Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2006) and a building level assessment for equity (Midwest Equity Assistance Center, 2000). Additionally, the team is exploring the Schoolwide Cultural Competence Observation Checklist (Bustamante, Nelson, & Onwuegbuzie, 2009).

Working to better understand how assistant principals conceive of caring for historically underserved students will assist in preparing and inducting school leaders who will see this work as a priority requiring intentional action, rather than a side effect we hope to achieve.

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