

THE ROLE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT IN CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP IN DIVERSE SMALL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative, narrative study was to investigate the role of the superintendent in leading the district to be more culturally proficient, resulting in the narrowing of the achievement gap in culturally diverse small districts. Eight superintendents of small school districts were purposefully selected based on their district size and their success in narrowing the achievement gap. Findings suggested that superintendents who recognize the importance of cultural proficiency and declare their willingness to lead the district through necessary focused change to address cultural proficiency lead their districts to reduce the achievement gap.

The national drive for excellence in education has focused on closing the achievement gap between White students and other demographic populations found in public schools in the United States (Manning & Kovach, 2003). Closing the achievement gap has been a focus of educators across the United States over the past three decades and most recently with the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (Ferguson, 2002).

Student demographics are quickly changing across the United States at the same time accountability for students meeting minimum standards is increasing for district and campus administrators (Marx, 2006). For example, in Texas, performance for all students and groups of students is reported through the AEIS (Academic Excellence Indicator System) (Texas Education Agency (TEA), 2006). Data from the AEIS suggested an achievement gap between white students and other groups of students in each of the cognitive areas assessed on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), (TEA, 2007). The report also showed minority students represented the majority of students in Texas (TEA, 2007). According to the Texas Education Agency, African American students represent 14.7%, Hispanic students represent 45.3%, and White students represent 36.5% of the student population in Texas.

Within the complex leadership role of the superintendent is the goal of closing the achievement gap and building cultural proficiency in diverse school districts among the teachers, community members, administrators, and parents of the district (Lindsey, Roberts, & CampbellJones, 2005). White (2007) noted a primary responsibility of the superintendent is to bring out the best leadership qualities in colleagues, parents, and students and cause them to embrace and promote the district's vision and

goals. In fact, all the visions, missions, and decisions of a school learning community should be focused on student learning (DuFour, 2004) and success, and developing vision and goals that focus on improving student achievement should be established collaboratively in a community of learners (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Practicing cultural proficiency is required to create this community of learners (Littky et al., 2004). Consequently, the superintendent's role is complex and accountable to the multicultural issues that affect the academic achievement of the students in our schools today (White, 2007). Educational leaders of academically successful districts with populations of demographically diverse students recognize that the achievement gap has multiple causes and must be confronted with varied approaches, including training educators to understand the cultural differences of the students they teach (Rothman, 2001).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative, narrative study was to investigate the role of the superintendent in leading the district to be more culturally proficient resulting in the narrowing of the achievement gap in culturally diverse small districts. Cultural proficiency is defined as the honoring of differences among cultures, viewing diversity as a benefit, and interacting knowledgeably and respectfully with a variety of cultural groups (Lindsey et al., 2005). For this study cultural proficiency was described as the actions and the accommodations within a district that aid in the understanding of cultural differences, resulting in the closing of the achievement gap. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How important is it that the superintendent recognizes cultural proficiency within the school district?
2. How has the superintendent's recognition of cultural differences impacted the leadership of the school district?
3. What is the role of the superintendent in leading the school district to become more culturally proficient?
4. What strategies have superintendents implemented that directly address the multicultural diversity in the district?
5. In what ways have the changes the district has made developing cultural proficiency among its stakeholders impacted the school district?
6. What is the role of the superintendent in working with the board of trustees in leading the district to become more culturally proficient?

Role of the Culturally Proficient Superintendent

A task force composed of representatives from multiple superintendent leadership institutions declared that leadership has significant

effects on student learning and successful superintendents must work to respond to the opportunities and challenges of educating diverse groups of students (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Waters and Marzano (2006) argued that leadership from the superintendent is essential to the academic achievement of the students in a district. They found that effective superintendents set goals for the district through collaborative practices, establish non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, and support the goals with resources and assistance from the board of trustees. Price (2007) interviewed five superintendents of culturally diverse districts and found that they recognized the importance of cultural proficiency and thus focused on leading the district to address cultural proficiency. This commitment to lead the district to be more culturally proficient led to reducing the achievement gap in all five districts.

According to Petersen (2004), The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has influenced the role of the superintendent with significant challenges that bring the position to the front lines of student achievement. School leaders should investigate the nature of the achievement gap and its root causes as a part of their responsibility, argued Snell (2003). Snell proposed that school leaders should implement a coherent and broad range of strategies that are designed to improve teaching and learning over time. Additionally, Snell suggested that leaders should model a consistent sense of urgency towards the problem, such as helping the school confront difficult equity issues. The superintendent as the district chief executive officer has the ultimate responsibility of closing the achievement gap between student groups in the school district (Houston, 2001).

Superintendents must understand the different cultures found in the communities where they serve (Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, & Glass, 2005). Hoyle et al. (2005) reported several important tenets of cultural sensitivity, including listening to the communities and being respectful of diversity issues. These authors suggested superintendents would be wise to build learning communities inside and outside the school buildings to respond to the needs of different cultures.

Trumbull, Greenfield, and Quiroz (2003) declared that superintendents need to recognize the big picture of the need for cultural proficiency within the school system. The researchers argued that if the goal of education is focused on the learning of each student in a multicultural society then superintendents should lead their staff to recognize and value the cultural differences of their students. Superintendents should ensure that schools provide opportunities for diverse groups of students to interact socially under conditions designed to reduce fear and anxiety (Hoyle et al., 2005).

Henze (2000) reported that proactive leaders can make a difference in race relations with the specific reforms they implement. She found that superintendents who encouraged leadership from stakeholders, who cared about achieving a more equitable and socially just environment, lead efforts to improve interethnic relations. The researcher suggest-

ed that building upon blended themes connected the vision of the school to its practices. Additionally, Harris (2004) suggested that campus leaders should support diversity by using an inviting and welcoming policy with parents, students, and community members.

In an examination of graduate students preparing for school leadership roles, Brown (2006) found that leaders increased their perception of their personal knowledge and action toward social justice following participation in a transformative learning process. She argued that educational leaders need to work for social justice and social change to provide the appropriate education for a multicultural society. The researcher affirmed that the development of transformative leaders was necessary for successfully facilitating cultural proficient educators in schools.

Rapidly changing demographics demand that educators engage in a vigorous, ongoing, and systemic process of professional development to prepare all educators in the school to function effectively in a highly diverse environment (Howard, 2007). Population trends in the United States affirm the nation will be a nation of minorities by 2050 when the white population drops below 50% (Marx, 2006).

Methodology

The researcher used a qualitative, phenomenological research design, specifically narrative inquiry, to investigate the superintendent's role in helping a school district become more culturally proficient. Creswell (1998) explained that a phenomenological study illustrates the meaning of the shared experiences of the participants in the study about a common occurrence or phenomenon. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) established the importance of separating the phenomenon from the participants to sort out the narrative view of the experience. They suggested that narrative inquiries are written around an extraordinary experience or phenomenon.

This study was an extension of Price's (2007) work on bringing cultural proficiency to a school district. Price used phenomenological narrative inquiry to interview five superintendents of districts located in or near a large urban area of Texas. Each district had a minimum 30% of students from demographic groups other than White. Additionally, each district had at least a minimum improvement of 10% in reducing the achievement gap. The selection criteria for this study remained the same except that superintendents from small school districts were targeted. Research questions 1–5 were revised slightly from the Price study for clarity. Research question 6 was an additional question specific to this study.

Population

From small school districts with diverse student populations, eight superintendents were purposefully chosen to be interviewed. A small dis-

trict was characterized by enrolled students of fewer than 2300. A diverse population was defined as a district with a minimum 30% of students from demographic groups other than White. An additional criterion included superintendents from districts that had made a minimum of 10% improvement in closing the achievement gap between percentage of students from non-White demographic groups and White students on the TAKS in math and/or reading at some point between the years of 2003–2007. The target population which met these criteria totaled 39 superintendents of whom eight agreed to participate in the study. The superintendents selected for the study were six White men and two White women; one of the superintendents had received a doctoral degree, and all had a minimum of two years experience as a superintendent. Each district had an enrollment between 500 and 2,300 students.

Data Collection

Each participant was provided with a written introduction to the study that explained the rationale. This was followed by a phone call or e-mail to clarify any questions the superintendent had and to schedule the initial interview. All interviews lasted from one to two hours. Participants responded to open-ended questions that paralleled the research questions for this study. Additional interviews were scheduled as needed for clarification of details from the initial interview. Triangulation of data from district archives, test scores and field notes taken during the interviews contributed to the trustworthiness of the study (Creswell, 1998). All responses remained confidential. Respondents answered all questions in their own words and from their own perspective as superintendent. Probing questions provided data saturation (Creswell, 1998). The use of a tape recorder allowed the researcher to reconstruct the event of the interview and freely participate in the conversation (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). To increase study credibility, the researcher conducted a pilot study in the spring of 2008 using the same criteria and interview procedures that were used in the actual study (Fink, 2005).

Data Analysis

The researcher organized the data so that patterns could be discerned through constant comparative analysis (Creswell, 1998). Once the patterns were established they were organized into themes. The researcher then constructed a narrative report that gave meaning to the data collected. Consistencies, as well as inconsistencies, were noted in the information gathered. In order to member check, participants were provided with a copy of their interviews to review for accuracy (Bowen, 2005). Writing an epoche allowed the researcher to further increase trustworthiness in an attempt to bracket biases and suspend personal opinions of the subjects utilized in this study (Creswell, 1998).

Findings

All eight participants agreed that the superintendent's beliefs were an important key to leading the challenge for a school district to become more culturally proficient. Specific findings are discussed in the order of the research questions.

Research Question 1

Superintendent beliefs about cultural proficiency emphasized the importance of understanding and respecting cultural differences for academic success for all students. One superintendent noted, "We have always felt like diversity was a benefit in our district." All of the superintendents reiterated a need for higher expectations of all students in their districts.

One participant emphasized that educators should understand the circumstances that face some cultures in their school district before they can address the needs of the individual student. He stated, "I feel that when you know the culture you know your people. You need to know the circumstances at home and in their daily life." Another pointed out, "To close or improve anything you have to be aware that there is an issue that needs to be addressed—awareness that there could be a gap or that there are differences."

All but two of the superintendents in the study had been in their district for eight years or more. Three of the superintendents grew up in or within ten miles of the district and two of the superintendents have never been in another district as an educator at any level. This led to the suggestion that their background knowledge of cultural issues within the district was more informed, based on their longevity in the district. For example, one commented, "I have spent my entire educational career in this district. I can tell you that the environment has changed in the twenty five years since I first arrived."

Research Question 2

Themes that emerged in response to the question regarding the superintendent's recognition of cultural differences and the impact on leadership were the importance of developing relationships and creating a culture of success.

Developing relationships. All of the superintendents in this study believed that building relationships with students, parents, and the community were essential for their success. One superintendent emphasized that "building relationships is important so people don't ignore someone because of their ethnicity or so they don't become a separate group in our district." Several superintendents suggested developing a relationship with members of the community by attending athletic events, speaking at

various churches and community programs in the area. Another superintendent emphasized the importance of building relationships by helping students at school feel connected.

Creating a culture of success. Each of the superintendents agreed that creating a culture of success and recognizing cultural differences were critical to leading the district. Six of the eight superintendents alluded to the importance of developing a culture of high expectations and all of the superintendents spoke about individualizing instruction as a means of improving academic achievement and bridging the achievement gap. Consequently, these superintendents focused on improving instruction across the district. For example, one superintendent pointed out “the delivery method of instruction needs to be different; teachers and administrators needed to understand that different kids learn in different ways.” One superintendent shared that she had learned to not accept failure of students or excuses from teachers. She described the importance of specific goal setting to improve student performance.

Research Question 3

The common themes that emerged regarding the role of the superintendent in leading the district to be culturally proficient were the superintendents’ responsibility to be a role model for cultural proficiency, their response to data, and their development of written policies that focused on building a climate of cultural proficiency which included hiring practices.

Being a role model for cultural proficiency. One superintendent indicated that role modeling begins at the top, especially with his belief in high expectations for students. He stated, “Our staff looks at me as a culturally proficient leader because of my respect for other cultures and that I believe that all students can learn no matter where they come from.” Two of the superintendents explained that the district’s stakeholders perceived them as culturally proficient role model leaders because of their fair treatment of all students. A female superintendent said, “I think they see me as involved with all students and they see me as a model who cares [for all students equally].”

Responding to data. All of the superintendents explained that they monitored data including the demographic changes in the district through information from the campus principals, and all standardized testing reports. They described meetings held with the administrative staff about major demographic changes and how they would be addressed. For example, one superintendent pointed out that his “role is to communicate these data, the changes and how our district looks culturally to our board, our community, and our staff.”

Establishing policies. Four of the superintendents developed written policy that addressed cultural issues. One superintendent described

how he implemented a policy to hire a diverse teaching and administrative staff. He noted, “if those data reflect that we need a more diverse teaching staff, then that is how we develop a goal like we did.” Another pointed out that he implemented a district wide-policy that required a meeting of the child and family of a student who failed any portion of the TAKS. He noted that in this way educators could work more closely with the child and the family, which should lead to better understanding cultural issues that might interfere with learning, as well as emphasizing cultural issues which might accelerate learning.

Research Question 4

The two themes that surfaced when the superintendents discussed the multicultural strategies used in their district were professional development and evaluation and planning. All of the superintendents emphasized the use of professional development and the use of data to evaluate programs and conduct planning for the development of cultural proficiency in their district.

Professional development. One superintendent argued that small districts have an advantage of knowing students on a more personal basis and that they should be proactive to prevent students from falling through the cracks. All of the superintendents conducted book studies with their leadership teams and teaching staffs. Each emphasized books that were selected with a cultural emphasis, and as they were read and discussed with faculty, efforts were made to relate the information to their own district. One superintendent reiterated this practice when he noted that he implemented book studies to help break cultural barriers in his district. Because there was a large percentage of economically disadvantaged students in each of these districts, working with students from low socio-economic backgrounds was a major focus for all of the professional development.

Evaluation and Planning. All of the superintendents stated that the programs in their district were monitored and evaluated constantly and programs not successful over a period of time were eliminated, while those that were successful were continuously improved. For example, one superintendent said, “we use longitudinal studies of three years to look at our data over a period of time. Evaluation is constant in our district.... Planning is accomplished through our principals as a leadership team.”

One superintendent commented that her administrators not only monitored testing, but also reviewed district programs for demographic representation and student success. She pointed out that student achievement reflected huge gains according to the most recent scores. All of the principals, the campus curriculum facilitators and the department heads were involved in the planning within this district.

Research Question 5

Research question 5 looked at the impact on the district when cultural diversity was the focus. The vision for each superintendent in the study was to close or eliminate the achievement gap in their district and for their schools to be successful in everything they did. Several of the superintendents desired to bring their communities together to work as one cohesive population. Also, each of the superintendents was viewed as a change agent in his or her district, and all of them had intervened with staff that resisted required change.

Vision. While all of the superintendents had a vision that there would not be any achievement gaps in the district, four of them also agreed that they wanted their communities to live in harmony and come together as one group. One superintendent stated that his vision for cultural awareness in the district was that all students would be successful and that there would be no achievement gap.

Change agent. Waters and Marzano (2006) argued that educational leaders have discovered that making substantial changes to their organization requires that they adjust the basic relationships that management and employees have with each other. Seven of the superintendents explained that their staff perceived them as change agents because of their focus on culturally proficient goals for the district and their specific modeling of cultural proficiency. One superintendent explained how his role changed shortly after coming to the district, “I became a very well known change agent three weeks after I was hired [and our district was labeled by the state as] Academically Unacceptable.” Another superintendent discussed his role as change agent when he said, “...because I was a local they thought I would fall in there and I would just be status quo. I began to make suggestions and some of it was well received and some of it wasn’t.”

Resistance to change. One superintendent explained his method of preventing resistance to change with district planning and strong communication of the district’s mission. He noted “I handle staff resistance to change by good planning; and quite frankly those kinds of people weed themselves out of the district.” All of the superintendents described their non-negotiable terms, but three specifically noted that there was resistance to the newer teacher expectations, especially among teachers who had over ten years of experience in the district. Each superintendent had a different method of working with a resistant staff, but eventually all of them terminated or non-renewed teacher contracts of staff who would not buy into the change process.

Research Question 6

Research Question 6 explored how the superintendent worked with the board of trustees when moving the district toward becoming more culturally proficient. They agreed that their role was to provide information to the board that concerned the academic achievement of each demographic group in their district. Every superintendent conducted board workshops to address academic concerns and the importance of developing cultural proficiency in the district.

All but one of the boards had members who understood that cultural proficiency played a role in closing the achievement gap. Membership on five of the eight boards was culturally diverse. The board of trustees that did not understand that cultural proficiency played a role in closing the achievement gap was all White.

One superintendent spoke highly of the board members' understanding of the need for cultural proficiency in his district. He explained, that having diversity on the board is positive because board members must have some understanding about other cultures. In all but one district, the superintendents in this study worked with school boards who reflected this thinking. For example, one superintendent commented, "our board looks at the data and they see the gaps and they know we need to improve. Just like when we changed our GT program, they wanted our programs to mirror our population."

Another superintendent described his understanding of the attitudes of the school board members:

Once they saw the results from some of the changes in the new data, they realized that [all of our] kids can learn. The board still has a long way to go and we need to continue with our board training, especially with our emphasis on becoming a culturally proficient school.

Conclusion and Implications for Practice

The findings of this study were consistent with the findings from the Price (2007) study which specifically noted the importance of vision, hiring practices, recognizing the need for change, understanding the quickly changing demographics, increasing student achievement, providing training for culturally proficient teaching, improving staff understanding of cultures, increasing connectivity with all students, and responding with urgency. Also, there was more discussion of the resistance to change in this study, which perhaps could be attributed to the small size of the districts involved. An omission in the Price study was the failure to explore how the superintendent worked with the board of trustees when moving the district toward becoming more culturally proficient. By adding a question on this point, this study acknowledged the importance of the working

relationship between the superintendent and school board as important to bringing cultural proficiency to a district.

When considered together, this study and the Price (2007) study shared the stories of 13 Texas superintendents from diverse districts. These studies emphasize that superintendents who recognize the importance of cultural proficiency will be more likely to be effective in leading a culturally diverse district. Superintendents who participate in educational training, personal reading, and diverse experiences are likely to recognize the importance of the need to be culturally proficient.

Leading a district to recognize and value diversity occurs through developing relationships with all members of the community and creating a culture of success. This community participation results in recognition of leadership responsibilities that emphasize cultural proficiency. The participants in this study emphasized that leaders should work to create for their schools a culture of continuous improvement through high expectations (Reeves, 2002). Likewise, these superintendents realized the importance of developing relationships and communicating to community stakeholders (Andero, 2000).

Being a role model for cultural proficiency is imperative for the superintendent who expects to lead a school district to become more culturally proficient. Professional development specific to developing cultural proficiency and the use of data to evaluate and plan programs in the district are effective strategies in valuing multicultural diversity in the district. Leaders need to provide teachers with training to effectively teach cultural experiences that contribute to understanding how to narrow the achievement gap (Manning & Kovach, 2003). The professional development conducted by the superintendents varied among the different districts from book studies, to the use of speakers, and the use of pre-established programs. A consistent focus of professional development for the superintendents was the impact of poverty on student achievement. Clearly, providing professional development emphasizing cultural proficiency is needed at every level of a school district.

Superintendents in diverse districts who have a vision to bridge the achievement gap by leading their districts to become more culturally proficient must be change agents. Thus superintendents must overcome resistance to change with staff members through building trust, establishing relationships, and providing direction through the change process (Duke, 2004). Superintendents in this study concurred with Fullan (2002) and were committed to the change process to raise the achievement level of all students.

Another integral part of leading a district to become culturally proficient is that of working collaboratively with the board of trustees. These superintendents provided board members with student data that was demographically disaggregated and conducted board workshops that related the development of cultural proficiency to the closing of the achievement gap. In most cases, these superintendents had the full support of a

school board that was interested in closing the achievement gap and ensuring that every child received a quality education. Thus, superintendents must acknowledge the importance of working with and educating their school board in order to enhance their district's commitment to cultural proficiency.

Finally, Southworth and DuQuesnay (2005) emphasized that leadership plays a key role in the effectiveness of the school. An increase in student standards requires dynamic leadership vital to educational reform. They argued that leaders who make a difference in the schools that they lead have developed specific pathways to influence student outcomes and good teaching. Overall the superintendents in this study and the Price (2007) study demonstrated leadership that made a difference in their school district. Their ability to recognize the importance of cultural proficiency and their willingness to lead the district through necessary change to address cultural proficiency is evidenced by the academic progress in their district. This level of commitment to leading the district to be more culturally proficient led to reducing the achievement gap in all of these school districts by at least 10%.

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Howell Wright Jr. is Superintendent of Rockdale Independent School District, Rockdale, Texas.

Sandra Harris is the Director of the Center for Doctoral Studies in Educational Leadership at Lamar University, Beaumont, Texas.