Equity through Inquiry: One Region's Effort to Provide Students and their Teachers with Leaders in their Schools that Look like Them

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ABSTRACT
This article details the process of recruiting and starting a cohort to prepare Latinx school administrators to fill impending positions in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School district. The authors provide the context and steps of establishing the administrator preparation program.

NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS (2nd Edition) ADDRESSED IN THIS ARTICLE:

1. A professional development school (PDS) is a learning community guided by a comprehensive, articulated mission that is broader than the goals of any single partner, and that aims to advance equity, antiracism, and social justice within and among schools, colleges/universities, and their respective community and professional partners.

2. A PDS is a context for continuous professional learning and leading for all participants, guided by need and a spirit and practice of inquiry.
Introduction

In today’s diverse classrooms, it is no longer uncommon to hear words such as “Of course you can become president! Just look at Barrack Obama.” Or “Of course you can become Vice President! Just look at Kamala Harris,” or “Of course you can become a Supreme Court Judge! Just look at Clarence Thomas.” Representation matters in all things – in our courts, in the White House, and in our schools. While the population of principals of color in U.S. public schools has been growing, data indicates that principals of color have been underrepresented and overly concentrated in poor and urban schools (Gates, et al., 2003).

We represent core professors working within a school leadership masters and certificate program at a large, urban university in the southeastern United States. Two of us are former students of that program. We serve adult graduate students in school administration who work as teachers, counselors, or in other roles in PK-12 schools throughout a region that spans over 11 counties across our state (and we do not mean virtually). We take our program out to the surrounding counties to meet demand, and over time, we have developed a strong principal pipeline that graduates an average of 50 new potential PK-12 school administrators every year. We have worked to cultivate a diverse candidate pool of administrative candidates from the region. African American representation within our cohorts is relatively high and matches PK-12 student demographics in our region’s schools. However, four years ago we found one area of our otherwise diverse student population to be sorely lacking.

In 2016, we noticed a striking lack of Latinx students in our school administration classes; in fact, there were none. We looked more broadly and found an extreme lack of Latinx leaders in our region’s schools. We traced the leadership problem to a lack of Latinx teachers in the region, the potential candidate pool for our graduate students and future school leaders. This lack of Latinx teacher candidates in our university preparation programs occurred at a time when the Latinx student population in the region was burgeoning. In 2010, the Latinx population in North Carolina was 8.4 percent; by 2019, that percentage had grown to 9.6, with the largest concentrations in urban Mecklenburg and Wake County and notable presence across the state’s more rural small towns (Tippett, 2020). This article chronicles the actions we took toward changing these significant ratios within a large urban school district to work toward equity. Our transparent inquiry resulted in reverse partnerships with our students and their district leaders and led to the creation of a multi-directional pipeline for increasing representation within the school leadership candidate pool through more personalized approaches to data-sharing and inquiry. We became the learners, as well as leaders, in this process of systemic change, meeting the first 4 of the NAPDS 9 Essentials; 1) articulating a mission broader than the goals of any single partner that aims to advance equity, antiracism, and social justice, 2) embraces the preparation of educators through clinical practice, 3) entails continuous professional learning and leading for all participants, guided by need and a spirit and practice of inquiry, and 4) involves a shared commitment to reflective practice, responsive innovation, and generative knowledge.

Background of the Problem

Seven years ago, the Aspiring Principal Pipeline Program, a collaborative effort between the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNCC) and the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) system, was formed to develop future school leaders, especially high school leaders. This effort was the result of an identified need by the district - a critical shortage of principal candidates within the district exacerbated by increasing numbers of pending principal
retirements. CMS is made up of 145,000 students, 9,507 teachers, 176 school principals, and 406 assistant principals or deans. The district created a Director of Principal Pipeline position, and that person reached out to us to brainstorm ways to shore up this looming leadership disaster. The first step was to engage established principals within the district to identify specific teachers within their schools and recommend that they consider participating in the leadership program. Identified candidates went through an application and 2-hour interview process that involved four 30-minute sessions (i.e., interview, data analysis, problem solving, and coaching teachers) involving both district and university personnel. Successful candidates were admitted to their first nine credits of coursework toward principal licensure with CMS contributing $1500.00 toward each students’ summer tuition. Many Black teachers had participated in the program since its inception; however, almost no Latinx teachers were coming through the program.

Also in 2016, we attended a Forum on Latinos in Education at the Museum of the New South in Charlotte, North Carolina, where we learned that the enrollment of the Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) for that year included approximately 22% (32,000 out of 145,000) students with at least some Hispanic/Latino descent; 25,600 of these students spoke Spanish in their homes, and this number was projected to keep rising (Helms, 2016). Last year, enrollment in CMS of Latinx children was over 35,000, almost 25%. In the fall of 2020, that percentage had risen to 26%, and, for the first time in district history, the Latinx population surpassed the white student population (Helms, 2020).

In February of 2018, a regional report titled Breaking the Link (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Office of Accountability, 2018) was published, highlighting the increasing disparities for Black and Latinx students in our local schools. The report revealed that Black and Latinx students have fewer opportunities and worse outcomes in the district, especially if they attend high-poverty schools. We discovered that out of 176 schools in this large urban district, there were only three Latinx principals. In the surrounding counties, there were none. As professors in a respected Department of Educational Leadership in the state’s Urban Research University, our mission is to prepare future leaders for the region’s diverse schools. All of us enjoyed extensive careers working in schools prior to coming to UNCC. Our students in Educational Leadership are teachers and staff from local districts and the surrounding region, and we have enjoyed considerable success as a department, winning a $3.7M Principal Fellows (TP3) competitive grant just last year for excellence in preparing school leaders. However, we were troubled that while the Latinx PK-12 student population had grown rapidly in the region, the numbers of Latinx teachers in our classes had not. In other words, there were almost no local Latinx teachers preparing to become principals. As Gandara and Mordechay (2017) argued, access to Latinx teachers positively impacts Latinx students. In addition, studies show that Latinx principals draw on the understandings of the importance of language and culture and actively work to address inequities while also serving as cultural brokers for students, teachers, and families, (Loebe, 2004; Murakami & Hernandez, 2015). Thus, we began our inquiry.

**Actions Taken**

Two years ago, we decided to investigate concrete strategies to increase the numbers of Latinx teachers in our master’s and certificate programs in School Administration. We had no start-up funds, just a commitment to addressing the underrepresentation of aspiring Latinx school administrators in our program and, in turn, the school districts we serve. This effort was firmly grounded in the research showing that children need role models with whom they can personally...
identify, and so do adults. According to research, increasing numbers of principals of Latinx descent should lead to increased numbers of Latinx teachers being hired and increased numbers of Latinx students with an interest in career paths in education. We began a strategic effort to increase the numbers of Latinx teachers becoming administrators in the region and named it the Latinx Leadership Initiative. We shared our findings related to this shortage of Latinx candidates within our administrative cohorts with the district office Director of the Principal Pipeline, Jevelyn Bonner-Reed, with whom we had already established a productive relationship. She immediately joined our cause and facilitated opportunities for us to visit the district to gain direct access to our target audience. We decided to hold an information session about our now established Aspiring Principal Program specifically aimed for teachers in good standing with leadership potential and possible aspirations who were of Latinx descent. Jevelyn went through the district database and identified every Latinx teacher in the 9,507-teacher district. Now we had our list!

Next, we met with a focus group of the three Latinx principals to seek their advice on recruiting Latinx students into the leadership program. They shared with us that the Latinx community is not monolithic and that there are many different cultures within this subgroup. They emphasized that we would need to appreciate the diverse backgrounds that make up our Latinx population. Jevelyn then allowed and helped us to distribute targeted emails which we penned in both English and Spanish. We organized our first information session at the district’s Language Academy for the candidates. We were excited that thirty-eight teachers attended this first session and the attendees were engaged and passionate. We invited some of our current students to speak about the Aspiring Principal Program and share what it took to move from being a teacher into a career path that involved leadership roles.

Then we listened. The Latinx teachers were skeptical at first; we learned there were challenges they faced in taking steps toward moving into administration. First, the master’s degree to become a school administrator and the certificate for those already holding a master’s degrees were not free. As for most teachers eyeing additional degrees, funding was of utmost concern for the attendees. At the inception of the program, the district had come through with funding for 15 summer credits, or $1,500 each, for up to 20 teachers for our Aspiring Principals Program. When this information was shared with the participants, it piqued interest. They learned about our program; we learned about their needs, and we set out to find ways to meet them.

Next, we approached our own Graduate School at the university for targeted funding to provide scholarship assistance to alleviate the financial burden for potential Latinx administrative candidates. They came through with additional scholarship funds for many of the Latinx teachers enrolled in the program. With support from the district for the summer work, and support from the university for the following semesters, Latinx student enrollment in our program increased.

There were ancillary benefits to the informational meetings. The teachers became aware of and connected with other colleagues across the district that they did not previously know. “Oh, you’re from Colombia? I’m from Colombia, too!” In fact, we had teachers from Venezuela, Ecuador, Mexico, Panama, and Costa Rica, to name a few. They spoke about their varied experiences and shared incredible stories about coming to the United States and overcoming vast obstacles. They also shared insights into the shortage of Latinx teachers. In some countries, 2-year college degrees are required to become teachers versus the 4-year
requirement in North Carolina. Some of our students had many years of teaching experience prior to coming to the U.S. Some shared their visa struggles and cultural hurdles, and they became resources for each other and for us. While we were not able to capture every word of every discussion, there were many valuable opportunities to communicate with colleagues without the need for interpreters during this informational session. We were excited to have our first five students of Latinx descent join our summer cohort that following year.

The Program Grows

The next year we held more sessions in different sites to better reach identified teachers across this large district. We invited the three sitting principals who were of Latinx descent to attend the sessions and speak to the group about being a principal in CMS. Much like providing students with teachers who serve as role models that look like them, current Latinx administrators provided interested teachers with role models with whom they could identify and ask questions about the possibilities of pursuing leadership. Later evaluative comments revealed that this was a powerful contribution to ultimately convincing candidates to take the steps necessary for becoming eligible for administrative roles.

Meanwhile, we supplemented the list of teachers provided by the district with information from our own students and former students who were now moving into administrative positions. Some of them had moved into leadership jobs in surrounding counties, and thus our reach broadened. These students and former students helped recruit others whom they worked with, whom they knew to be of Latinx or mixed Latinx descent. This eventually opened doors and expanded the candidate pool beyond the district. Currently, two of our former students have moved into administrative roles within CMS, and others are being heavily recruited by surrounding districts. Thus, we have begun to bring these alumni in as guest speakers. This past year when we took our informational sessions to surrounding districts, and more teachers have been coming to the sessions. The word is clearly out.

Today we are happy to report that there are three Latinx Deans of Students and three Assistant Principals in CMS, and 17 new Latinx students in our program. We have broadened our inquiry to include our undergraduate teacher preparation program and shared the results of our initial investigation with our students. Our teacher education programs are now tracking numbers of undergraduate Latinx students and exploring similar ways to increase interest for Latinx students to consider teaching as a profession.

In summary, we found that treating students and teachers as valued resources and engaging in reciprocal dialogue went a long way in our efforts to increase Latinx student representation in our program. By viewing and working with district teachers, leaders, and our former students, we were able to inquire authentically into a regional problem, raise visibility of the problem, collaborate as partners, and make strides toward addressing the Latinx leader shortage. In the future we expect to hear more “Of course you can become a Supreme Court Justice! Just look at Sonia Sotomayor.” And “Of course you can be a member of the POTUS cabinet! Just look at Alejandro Majorkas, Xavier Becerra, or Miguel Cardona.” And “Of course you can be principal of this high school!”
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