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It Is Simple, But Not Easy—Culturally Responsive Leadership and Social Capital: A Framework for Closing the Opportunity Gap

Alisa Taliaferro
atalia1458@gmail.com

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Abstract

The article explores social capital and culturally responsive leadership theories as a means to understand and bridge differences that arise in diverse educational settings for public school leaders. Issues explored include those related to the educational histories and cultural heritages that students and stakeholders bring with them to the educational setting. More specifically, the article illuminates how the merging of social capital and culturally responsive leadership theories as a conceptual framework for leadership can lead to not only student achievement, but also positive social networking and relationships among school leaders, teachers, and students. Emphasis is placed on the notion that in order for school leaders to close the achievement gap, they must first close the opportunity gap.

Keywords: culturally responsive leadership, social capital, accumulative advantages

The most successful school leaders are those who are in tune with the students, staff and their communities. These leaders are connected to his or her school community in a way that creates and sustains positive relationships among and between parents, students and staff members. This type of leader understands that it is important for the students to feel that they are a part of the school community and that their contributions matter. The teachers in this type of educational environment care on a personal level for the student, which extends beyond the classroom assignments and projects. Successful school leaders provide students with many opportunities to participate in the schooling process. These school leaders understand the basic fundamental tenet of leadership that “who I am” and “what I am” as a student matters and is ultimately a predictor of success. They understand that students’ culture, heritage and world view are shaped through the prism of their experiences. By understanding this fundamental tenet of leadership, successful school leaders are able to cultivate an environment of respect, cultural awareness, not only for the staff, students and teachers they serve, but also for themselves. Brown (2008) posits that principals appear to be equipped with the necessary tools and expertise, yet the outcomes remain the same (pp.1). So the questions become, what do school leaders need to possess, what do they need to understand and what is the missing link that school leaders lack that prevents them from making the connections needed to improve schools? The answer is grounded in two theoretical constructs: culturally responsive leadership and social capital.

Culturally Responsive Leadership

Many attempts have been made to define the principal’s role in schools; however, there has been a sustained trend of school leaders’ incapacity to lead and the failing of public schools continues to plague the educational system (Brown, 2008). We have great knowledge about what the principal’s role in schools should be; yet, it remains extremely difficult to mobilize the support, resources and cultivate the type of leadership needed to make a systemic difference in the lives of the students they lead. Thus, the central question is how to develop the type of leader needed to cultivate a school’s culture to create the systemic and sustained efforts required to build bridges of community support and

thus, better outcomes for students.

Majority of the literature on school leadership examines how principals can become better effective managerial leaders in their schools. These viewpoints incorporate more of the traditional mindscape of leadership (Sergiovanni, 2008). These models of leadership view the principal as an orbiter that sits on high and dispenses knowledge to the people. This paradigm of leadership suggests that if only schools had more rules in place, more policies, and more guidelines, this would prove to be the magic key to unlock the door of low student achievement and disengaged school communities. This traditional mindscape of leadership fails to address the central aspect of the type of leader needed to redefine schools for today's 21st Century environments. However, culturally responsive leadership addresses the many modalities that the 21st century leader will need to possess to be effective and create the type of environment that promotes the success of all students.

Culturally responsive leadership framework is based on Gay (2000) work on culturally responsive teaching pedagogy. Gay's work defined culturally responsive teaching as validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative and emancipatory. This work, along with Sergiovanni (2007) principle of "management of self" was applied to leadership in order to develop a framework for defining culturally responsive leadership.

Sergiovanni (as cited in Taliaferro, 2011) posits that culturally responsive leaders lead with an understanding of how their values and beliefs influence their day-to-day decision-making and behavior in the schools (Sergiovanni, 1992). Culturally responsive leaders understand the relationship between "what they say they believe" and "what they actually do" (Sergiovanni, 2007). Sergiovanni terms this as the synergy between your heart, hand and head of leadership. These leaders are adept to understanding the underlying principles that influence their behavior. They lead with an understanding of self (Sergiovanni, 2008, pp. 3).

Taliaferro (2011) argues that culturally responsive leaders are validating in their response and actions toward their school communities (pp. 3). Gay (as cited in Taliaferro, 2011) posits that culturally responsive educators acknowledge the legitimacy of the educational histories and cultural heritages of their students (pp.3). Villegas and Lucas (2002) contend that "teachers who respect cultural differences are more apt to believe that students from nondominant groups are capable learners, even when these children enter school with ways of thinking, talking, and behaving that differ from the dominant cultural norms" (pp.38). Barnes (2006) explains in the following:

Culturally responsive teaching facilitates and supports the achievement of all students. It requires teachers to create a learning environment where all students are welcomed, supported, and provided with the best opportunities to learn regardless of their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. To effectively do so, teachers need to utilize the three dimensions within the culturally responsive teaching framework: (a) academic achievement—make learning rigorous, exciting, challenging, and equitable with high standards; (b) cultural competence— know and facilitate in the learning process the various range of students' cultural and linguistic groups; and (c) sociopolitical consciousness—recognize and assist students in the understanding that education and schooling do not occur in a vacuum. (Gay, 2000, pp.86)

Taliaferro (2011) notes that just as important, culturally responsive leaders acknowledge the

educational histories and cultural heritages of their staff and the parents within their school communities (pp.3). Like culturally responsive teachers, culturally responsive leaders have affirming views towards diversity and respect those differences among staff and school community members.

The role of a culturally responsive leader is comprehensive and multidimensional (Gay, 2000). This leadership approach, like teaching, requires that leaders be responsive to every aspect of the schooling process (Taliaferro, 2011). Culturally responsive leadership requires principals to understand not only the physical, intellectual, social, and emotional components of child development as it relates to the students in the school (Gay, 2000 ; Slavin, 2005). Equally, culturally responsive leaders must understand how the physical, intellectual social and emotional components shape the worldview and experiences of their staff and the school community at-large. Culturally responsive leaders, in the words of Ladson-Billings (as cited in Taliaferro, 2011), must use the cultural referents of the students, teacher, and community to lead them toward academic success (pp. 4).

According to Gay (as cited in Taliaferro, 2011), this requires

... culturally responsive leaders to encourage the teachers in his or her schools to use culturally valued knowledge in their lessons as a way to strengthen the connection between home and school environment (Hollins, 1996). Hollins (1996) coined the term culturally valued knowledge. Thus, culturally responsive leaders understand the importance of academic success, but also of maintaining the cultural identity and heritage of the students during the educational process. (pp. 4)

Culturally responsive leadership is empowering. Taliaferro (2011) explains that these leaders empower their teachers to take risks within the educational framework (pp.4). Sergiovanni (as cited in Taliaferro, 2011) contends that culturally responsive leaders understand that the way to academic success for all students is to allow teachers to have ownership or to take ownership of their work through commitment and motivation to the school's goals (pp. 5). Gay (2000) posits the following:

Culturally responsive teaching enables students to be better human beings and more successful learners...students must believe they can succeed in learning tasks and have motivation to persevere. Teachers must demonstrate ambitious and appropriate expectations and exhibit support for students in their efforts toward academic achievement. (para.6)

More importantly, Sergiovanni (as cited in Taliaferro, 2011) contends that culturally responsive leaders know that to enable feelings of empowerment among teachers is essential to their commitment and motivation to the work (pp.4). Taliaferro (2011) asserts that once teachers are committed to the work, this leads to a positive school climate and ambitious expectations for the students (pp. 5).

Culturally responsive leadership embodies the idea of education for liberation (Freire, 1993, Hooks, 1994). Hooks (1994) posits that "to educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn" (pp.13). She continues, "to teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin" (pp.13). Taliaferro (2011) emphasizes that it is only through educating for liberation that school leaders can transform those educational structures that impede the success of students (pp. 5). She contends that culturally responsive leaders educate to liberate, are transformative in their leadership practice and that this transformation is born out of the ability to help their students, staff and community members develop the knowledge and skills needed to become social critics

(pp.5). Within this construct, culturally responsive leaders who educate for freedom demonstrate this through the practice of acting justly (Wilbur, 2011). These leaders are social activist who assert, in the words of Wilbur (2011), “acting justly, as an outcome, permits a wide range of student decisions that enable personal well-being and social responsibility....collaboration in the decision making process extends perspectives and enriches possibilities” (pp.8).

Hooks (1994) posits that educators must have the ability to reimagine the possibilities of schooling for students within this transformational construct. She asserts that “a rethinking of ways of knowing, a deconstruction of old epistemologies, and the concomitant demand that there be a transformation in our classrooms, in how we teach and what we teach, has been a necessary revolution- one that seeks to restore life...” (pp. 30). Culturally responsive leaders understand that for this transformation to take place, it requires letting go of the old and “making room” for new ideas, initiatives and practices (Taliaferro, 2011, pp. 5).

In culturally responsive leadership environments, the members of the school community are empowered to take risk with instructional practices, initiatives, and programs for students. Banks (as cited in Taliaferro, 2011) argues that students are able to challenge the status quo and become social critics who are able to examine the centrality of their experiences (pp. 5).

Since, culturally responsive environments are affirming towards diversity, multidimensional, empowering for staff, students and the community, this creates a climate that is liberating (Taliaferro, 2011). This freedom, as a result of liberation provides culturally responsive leaders with the context needed to make real changes and respond to challenges in his or her school in a way that will make systemic difference in the lives of their students. Within this construct, culturally responsive leadership requires that school principals understand that there is no single truth as it relates to the schooling experiences of staff, students and the school community (Gay 2000; Villegas and Lucas 2002).

According to Taliaferro (2011), liberation is the result of improved outcomes for students and staff in the school community. She contends that “students are more successful in environments that are caring, supportive and accepting of their identities” (pp.5). Moreover, the home-school relationship will be stronger, if the identities, educational and schooling histories of the students, staff and school community are supported and validated (Taliaferro, 2011, pp.5.)

Social Capital

Social capital is critical to the success of one becoming a culturally responsive leader. Social capital theory advances the construct that social networks have value, that there are a certain norms, and trust that arise from these networks (Putnam, 2000, pp.19). Orlich, Harden, Callahan and Brown (2009) contend that social capital can be defined as “the sum of interpersonal relationships that provide support or encouragement” (pp. 8). These interpersonal relationships, and thus, networks generate obligations among individuals and relationships among people within the school community. Social capital is the “sociological superglue’ that binds people and communities together (Putnam, 2000, pp. 23).

The concept of social trust is born out of much of Coleman and Putnam’s research on social capital (as cited in Taliaferro, 2008). Putnam defines trust in two ways. He argues that trust can be separated into “thick” or “thin” categories (pp.136). According to the Putnam, thick trust centers on our most intimate social ties whereas thin trust refers to generalize trust for the community at large. He concludes that it is

through this process of acquiring trust for individuals and society that undergirds the strong foundation needed to create social trust in communities and therefore, social capital. Moreover, Putnam asserts that social capital is predicated on the notion of generalized norms of reciprocity and is rooted in the basic tenets of the Golden Rule principle, “Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you” (pp.21).

The relationship between social capital, academic achievement and educational opportunity has been well documented in the research (Putnam, 2000; Tedin and Weiher, 2011). In school communities where there are high level of trust among individuals, interactions among peers as well as interconnectedness between teacher and student are stronger. This also bodes well for the relationship between the home and school community is more likely to be positive. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (1995), the more students participate in extracurricular school activities, the more likely they are to score in the highest quartile in composite math and reading assessments (pp.2) The National Center for Educational Statistics data revealed that these same students are more likely to have a grade point average of a 3.0 or better and be expected to earn a bachelor’s degree or higher (pp.2). Consequently, the more students participate in school, the stronger their social capital becomes and thus, better opportunities arise from these connections. In short, school communities that have a high social capital index that is positive yield better outcomes for students.

Social Capital and Culturally Responsive Leadership

Moreover, Putnam and Coleman (as cited in Taliaferro et al. 2008) states, “... ‘access to positive social interactions and access to secure social intimacies such as: family, peer relationships, and a network of individuals who strive and believe in quality education as well as educational attainment is essential’ for successful student outcomes” (pp. 81). The blending of these two theoretical constructs: culturally responsive leadership and social capital is essential to changing the current trajectory of educational outcomes for students. According to Crawford (1998), “... the nation cannot attain excellence in education without effective school leadership” (pp. 8). Culturally responsive leadership addresses the issue of excellences in leadership as it provides a conceptual framework for leaders to follow for building and sustaining school communities that not only survive, but also thrive regardless of its populous of students.

Furthermore, school principals must understand that a child’s success in school is directly related to the opportunities they have had in life. Gladwell (2008) contends, “What distinguishes our histories is not extraordinary talent, but opportunities” (pp. 4). He proposes that success is ultimately determined by the amount of opportunities, “accumulative advantages” that one has had in life. Putnam (2000) states that “the presence of social capital has been linked to various positive outcomes... [for students]” (pp. 296). Social capital addresses the issue of opportunities because this theory provides a road map for school leaders to follow in order to create more opportunities in their building for students who have not had these “accumulative advantages.” The more students, staff and the school community are connected to each other through the development of dense social networks and trust circles, the more opportunities the school community will have in meeting the needs of its members; particularly, those who have historically been marginalized.

It is simple, but not easy to create the type of environment that provides a sustained pathway for student, teachers and the school community success. However, school principals must work toward

becoming culturally responsive leaders who understand the influences of social capital and how it affects the overall health on the school. School leaders who are culturally responsive understand that culture matters and an environment that is accepting provide the opportunity or vehicle needed to create a culture of academic excellence. Culturally responsive leaders understand that to close the achievement gap, they must first close the opportunity gap for all students.

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