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Women of Color School Leaders: Leadership Schools Should Not Ignore

Jean M. Haar and Jerry W. Robicheau

School districts are faced with challenges resulting from the changing demographics of the student population. Consequently, school districts are creating positive, multicultural learning environments. School districts intent on establishing multicultural learning environments should consider the contributions people of color, specifically women of color can make in leading the endeavor. This study highlights the insights and experiences of three women of color school leaders. Their stories demonstrate how leadership from women of color contributes to the development of positive, multicultural learning environments. Their stories provide insight for school districts as they seek effective leadership for their schools and for administration preparation programs as they prepare aspiring school leaders.

School districts, challenged by the needs of a changing student population, are focused on creating positive multicultural environments. In conjunction with developing a multicultural environment, however, attention should be directed to the contributions people of color in school leadership positions can make. Brown (2005) noted,

[W]ith the face of public school students becoming more colored, the face of teachers becoming less colored and the face of leadership remaining for the most part white, the effects of race and gender on leadership credibility in the diverse organizations we call schools can no longer be ignored. (p. 53)

Wesson (1998) observed, “Although women comprise a majority of the nation’s public school teaching force, most school administrators are white males, and at the highest level in public school administration, the superintendency, there seems to be a great deal of resistance to gender and minority integration” (p.1). Wesson continued by noting, “The racial and ethnic stratification of faculty, leaders, and board members in the education system in American schools is even more striking than the gender stratification” (p. 2).

A study conducted by Haar and Robicheau (2007) supports Wesson’s contentions about the “whiteness” of school leadership. The study identi-

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fied an under-representation of women and people of color in school administration with a 2:1 ratio of men to women and a greater than 2:1 ratio of White/Caucasian to people of color. Alston (2000) discovered that nationally African women held fewer than five percent of the superintendent positions and fewer than 20% of principal positions. Ortiz (2000) contended the absence of women, especially women of color is because school boards, former superintendents and search firms are predominately white males.

The effects of gender and race on school leadership can no longer be ignored (Brown, 2005). Murtadha-Watts (2000) argued that it is women, specifically Black women, who provide a passionate message that all students can learn despite poverty and other factors. Consequently, they are often hired by troubled, urban districts in an attempt to restructure these districts.

Purpose and Methodology

Our study focused on the fact that the demographics of district populations are not reflected in school district leadership and that people of color school leaders play a crucial role with creating programs and systems responsive to the needs of a diverse, multiethnic student body. We framed a qualitative study intent on capturing the voices of experienced people of color school leaders—specifically their experiences as leaders and their perceptions about meeting the needs of diverse student populations. We were sensitive to the need to transcribe and interpret the findings without inflicting our own culture bias (Tillman, 2006). This required us to place the subjects in the center and focus on the findings rather than principal leadership theories.

The purpose of study was to add to the literature on the absence of people of color in school leadership positions and to examine how their experiences and perceptions could be used within administrative preparation pro-

grams. Five research questions framed the study: (a) what challenges do people of color face in securing leadership positions; (b) what challenges do people of color face in their current position; (c) how important is it to have a person of color in a leadership position where the majority of students are students of color; (d) how can educators of color be encouraged to seek school leadership positions; and (e) what suggestions would you make regarding recruitment of people of color into administrative preparation programs? The experiences and stories of three women of color school leaders are shared.

Findings

The following information is based on preliminary findings of the study.

Participants

The three participants are practicing principals. Two were from Nigeria and had immigrated to America. The other was raised in the United States. The two from Nigeria have doctorates in educational leadership and the other has a specialist. All three have been school leaders for at least five years. Pseudonyms were given to each of the participants.

Tammy—Tammy moved as an adult to the United States from Nigeria. She shared her path to school leadership:

For me, education has always been a central part of my life. Without it, I don't think I would be where I am today. I have always admired my teachers. My principal was a very committed person. She gave up so much to really enforce education for us because most of us were dropping out and being taken to get married. It was a serious problem for the principal. I was one of those that really had a passion for learning. I was excited about school. Actually, that was my safe haven from chores and so many other things. And then, when I went to college, I also saw in my professors, this thing next to God. Everybody in education was highly respected and revered by me.

When I came over here [United States], I noticed that they have a kind of distinct role for school administrators and teachers—people have to get a license. [In Nigeria] you go to school, you know how to read and write, and then you could teach. You could be an administrator. So I started thinking, if I went back home, meaning to Nigeria, I could do a lot with having some education and, specifically, to prove I have something called “educational administration.” I had absolutely no idea that I was going to practice here. I did it in preparation to fill a void in my own community.

Fern—Fern also immigrated to the United States as an adult. She stated:

I had immigrated into the country and that was fine. I literally had no teaching experience when I came to the country, but I come from a teaching background. I like to say what I can do and do well, and I am a competent person. I was raised

with confidence. I was raised by parents who told me all the best. So, that's the beauty of not growing up in this culture. If I grew up in this culture, I'm sure I would have a low cultural aware. As a leader, I know that. Let no one fool you. So, I think as a defense between me and someone growing up in this culture would be my level of confidence. I knew growing in, I could do a good job.

Julie—Julie entered education and school administration after pursuing a career in science. She commented:

I didn't start out in education, I started as a chemist. For most of us it takes a while to realize that money isn't the only thing that there is. You do want to begin to give back to the community. When I earned my teaching license, they had a program they paid me half of what a first year teacher would make because I quit my job as a chemist. I did that because I needed to see if this is what I wanted. That really helped me make a decision.

I started out as a chemist. It was at a time when there were very few women of color and there were very few women in the industry. It was just not a good experience. So, I looked at that. I came from a community where people helped each other. I said, okay, I've got this chemistry degree, what can I do? So, I made a decision that I would look at teaching. I went to school to get a license to teach and ended at a school where the principal was a female. For whatever reason, when you've been in industry, I think you come in differently, and she just saw something in me. She talked to me about going into school administration. This was a woman I respected. If she thought I could do it, I thought I could do it, too. The principal I had coached me, and I think that's what we have to do. We have to encourage, if we are talking more women in administration or more people of color in administration, those of us who are in those jobs will have to encourage people to take those jobs.

Stories and Insights

The stories they shared about their experiences and challenges in school leadership provided insight into their basic educational beliefs. Each of the women approached their school leadership in a distinct manner. However, they felt a constant need to be aware of how they were viewed, mostly because of who they were and because of their race. For instance, Fern commented, "I know that I have to prove to families, to teachers and to staff that I know what I am doing. There isn't a day that goes by that I don't think about that." Julie added, "You need to try to figure out what is going on. It isn't always about race; you need to pay attention to what people are saying." Tammy noted, "You have to watch what you say—it is very important, minority leaders tend to think we are being treated a way because of who we are, and those things get in the way."

Each said they had a strong support system. Fern said it was her family and especially her parents who were her strongest support. Julie found that once there was more than one person of color in the district it became easier.

Tammy had a principal who encouraged her and identified her strength as a school leader.

As women of color they experienced special pressures. Fern stated that she always felt she needed to be a step ahead of everyone else. Julie felt she always needed to be aware of the possibility that people approach her from ignorance. She had learned to accept that some people were just ignorant. Tammy contended that things that happen could not be taken personally. Taking things personally distracted from what needed to be done.

Additional challenges they faced specific to being a woman of color in a school leadership position were also shared. Julie commented, "When you are the only person of color and there are no other people of color and something comes up about people of color you need to say, 'I only speak for myself.'" She continued, "Sometimes the equity issue is more of a challenge because of who I am. If a middle-aged male were sitting at my desk would I have the same conversation? I think no." Julie also believed the appearance of her building was crucial so she would not be judged negatively by a poor appearance. She did not want people to see things needing fixing and associate that with a person of color. Fern stated,

You need to be cognizant of what people are saying. I want to give them the benefit of the doubt regarding how they see me. People challenge you because you are a woman, because you are a person of color. I've already decided that's not my issue. They are going to need to figure out how to deal with me because right now I'm not going anywhere. We need to figure out how to work with each other.

Tammy voiced the fear of "bearing the burden of one bad person of color" with all people of color being labeled in that manner. She stated, "You need to carry the burden of every bad administrator." Julie contended that the issue is due to the fact that people "haven't had enough connections with different people." Fern and Julie stated they were constantly careful with what they said and how they said it because of the way they would be judged.

Securing leadership positions involved challenges for the women. Tammy used her language abilities to secure her first position. She stated, "Without the French language I would not be where I am today." It was evident that networking and connections played a significant role with securing a position. They all specifically stated they knew someone or made connections in securing a position. Tammy shared, "I made connections but the politics you have to play, that was a challenge and still is today."

Fern contended that she would only accept a position where the school enrolled at least 25% students of color. She felt it was necessary to connect with that type of student demographic. It was also important for her that the school wanted her as a school leader. Tammy, who is a principal at a French Immersion School, felt the support from the area superintendent who vali-

dated the importance of Tammy's ability to speak French and who provided continuous support for her was critical in her ability to succeed.

The participants had a wealth of advice regarding how to encourage women of color to seek school leadership positions. Advice ranged from Tammy suggesting, "Don't take things personally because as minority leaders we tend to think others are treating us this way because of who we are. Those things get in the way and you have to watch what you say. Don't take things for granted." Julie commented on the need to "have more people of color mirroring our children, but I am also glad they can make choices. It is difficult to attract people of color [to education] because they do have options other than teaching." Julie felt that one way to address the issue was to offer higher wages. Tammy stated, "There is a need to develop a more inclusive environment. This is especially necessary for other women of color to see how this can be done."

The participants emphasized the importance of having a person of color in a leadership position where the majority of students are students of color. Tammy contended that it was critical, not just important: "Leaders of color come from a paradigm of thinking that we need to see examples. We need to see it in action and if we don't, it is difficult to make applications." She also stated, "We need more people of color in leadership positions because of the way we relate to students." Julie stated, "It is more important that you have people who care about kids regardless of where they come from. But in schools it is important to have people in leadership positions be they teachers or whomever; they need to be in a position where kids can say 'I can be that.' Young people need to see what they can become." Regardless of personal perspectives, the participants were in agreement that role models are important in schools where the population is predominantly students of color.

There were many suggestions offered by the participants about ways to recruit other women of color into administrative preparation programs. Tammy suggested, "Target certain communities or markets . . . or look at specific organizations. . . . I know it is important to have this for black educators, and there are a number who aspire to be administrators."

Tammy further stated, "Because the pool [candidates for programs] is big, you need to make yourself visible and make connections and sell yourself. You need to be given the opportunity to be visible." Julie suggested a paid internship: "Look at medical interns, they get paid." She also suggested a collaborative be established between a university and schools. She referenced a program she had been involved with as a model to consider:

This was connecting young people with schools, so when they graduated most had jobs. That's one thing if you had a program where you knew a school district was looking for people and say we have someone and they are going to be ready in two years and allow people to shadow someone who is set to retire, again modeling, how do you convince someone who's never seen something that is that or that it can happen.

In an effort to assist with the financial part she suggested the need for scholarships. Fern challenged the need for strong connections between preparation programs and school districts by stating, "There needs to be a way so that schools trust that an administrator of color is going to do the job. How can school districts also trust that administrators or people of color can do a good job?" Julie elaborated on that statement saying, "... or that when they come, this is something they need that they haven't even thought they needed so how do you work with a district and you know districts are becoming diversified." Fern concluded, "It is not only recruitment but then retention. Make sure they are comfortable, make sure if a parent who is a white man comes and talks to you about their decisions or leadership that you are going to stand by your employees."

Methods to accomplish this were suggested by the participants. Many teachers of color, as pointed out by Tammy, will seek non-traditional ways to attend university programs. She suggested that programs target certain markets and look at organizations. She stated, "There are a lot of aspiring black administrators but they don't know how to go about it."

What Their Stories Told Us

Having heard the stories of these three women of color who are in leadership positions, we believe it is paramount for institutions of higher education to listen and take action. First there is a need for preparation programs to be more cognizant of the role women of color leaders assume in education. As Whitaker and Vogel (2005) suggested, higher education can devise mechanisms to encourage people of color to enter the field of school administration by (a) encouraging them to enter the field, (b) providing excellent mentors, and (c) assisting with university tuition.

In an effort to attract women of color to preparation programs, universities need to reach out to individuals. Methods to accomplish this were suggested by the participants. Many teachers of color, as pointed out by Tammy, will seek non-traditional ways to attend university programs. She suggested that programs target certain markets and look at organizations. She stated, "There are a lot of aspiring black administrators but they don't know how to go about it." Moreover, a support system is important and needed as well. Preparation programs need to establish a collaborative with districts and organizations and create a cadre of individuals who can offer support once a woman of color is in the field. It is not enough to have people of color enroll in preparation programs; it is equally important to build a support system once they are in positions of leadership.

Each participant commented on mentors; someone they looked to for support and encouragement. The need for coaching is important once people are in positions of leadership. They should not feel as if they are working in isolation. University programs need to build coalitions. These coalitions can be with organizations as well as districts.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Women of color in leadership bring richness to school administration. As noted in the literature and supported by the findings of this study, we cannot ignore the effects of race and gender on leadership credibility. Recommendations drawn from the data, supported by the literature are intended to add to the national dialogue regarding the need to encourage and retain women of color school leaders. Recommendations include (a) the development of a mentoring system in preparation programs and in the field; (b) preparation programs, school districts and organizations working collaboratively to acknowledge and honor the contributions women of color make to school leadership; (c) preparation programs building in flexibility and alternative processes that are respectful of cultural differences; (d) the availability of scholarships to support women of color through preparation programs; (e) purposeful internships structured so women of color can gain the experiences needed to understand how to best work within school systems and to recognize the potential they have as school leaders; (f) an intentional and vigilant expansion of the national dialogue about how school leadership must more equally reflect the changing student demographics, and (g) establish a pipeline of women of color currently in the teaching ranks to consider a position of school leadership.

The recommendations are only a beginning of the work that needs to occur to increase the number of women of color in school leadership positions. Based on the findings of this study, preparation programs should consider a self-analysis regarding inclusion of women of color within their programs. Women of color school leaders bring a valued richness to schools and student learning. It is an injustice to the field of education to ignore this critical resource. By studying women of color leaders, researchers can further contribute to the understanding of leadership, in general, and to the contributions made by women of color to school leadership (Mendez-Morse, 2004).

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