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About the Leading for Diversity Research Project

Rosemary C. Henze
San Jose State University, rosemary.henze@sjsu.edu

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Introduction

About the Leading for Diversity Research Project

The five articles in this issue's special focus section share a common origin and similar perspectives. They concentrate on how school leaders in various roles can work to improve racial/ethnic relations in our schools, particularly when these schools serve several diverse populations and have histories of conflict or tension related to race and ethnicity. In this short introduction, my intent is to explain this common basis, provide an historical perspective and theoretical context, describe the methodology shared by all five contributing authors, and highlight what readers can expect to learn from the individual articles.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Leading for Diversity Project began to take shape in 1995, when a group of urban principals in the San Francisco Bay Area met with several staff members of ARC (Art, Research, and Curriculum) Associates, a nonprofit organization based in Oakland, California, to discuss common issues and establish a focus for their professional development activities. Among the issues that surfaced, the principals agreed that violence and racial conflict were the most pressing. They also commented that their administrative credentialing programs had not done a good job of preparing them to address conflict in their schools, especially racial or ethnic conflict. This meeting led to a series of discussions about how to better prepare school leaders to be guiding forces in efforts to improve racial/ethnic relations in schools. One outcome of these discussions was a decision to seek funding for a research project that would identify and describe what proactive school leaders are doing and must do to address racial/ethnic conflict and promote more positive interethnic relations. This research, conducted as case studies, could then form the basis for a curriculum that could be used in administrative preparation programs as well as in-service professional development for school leaders.

With grants from the U.S. Department of Education's Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE) and Field-Initiated Studies Program as well as support and encouragement from a wide range of individuals who saw this effort as a valuable and much-needed project, what is now known as the Leading for Diversity Research Project began. Launched in 1996 with funding that would extend for five years, the Project was firmly grounded in and responsive to the needs of leaders in urban schools with diverse populations. To carry it out, a multiethnic team was assembled, including five researchers from ARC and one university partner from San Francisco State University.

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THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Theoretically, the Leading for Diversity Project is an effort to bring together two different fields: school leadership and multicultural, antiracist education. The literature on the latter has focused a great deal on curriculum and pedagogy as the units of change. Indeed, the multicultural, antiracist education literature has provided a theoretical and practical basis for teachers at various levels of schooling to bring about greater inclusion of previously marginalized groups, enhanced learning among all students, increased understanding of cultural and other differences, and enhanced social action skills that enable youth to take leadership in promoting social justice (Nieto, 1999; Sleeter, 1996). Though Banks noted in 1989 that "multicultural education involves changes in the whole school; it is not limited to curricular changes" (p. 3), the bulk of this scholarship has not been directed at those with titular authority in schools—that is, principals, assistant principals, superintendents, and others. Recognizing this gap, Contreras (1992) stated, "Training and development of leaders for the education of at-risk students has come to need refocusing to mediate the new diversity that is characteristic of our at-risk schools" (pp. 160–161). Similarly, Murphy (1992) found that the preparation of school leaders has "marked deficiencies with regard to issues of diversity" (p. 91). Fullan (1999) suggested that in order to integrate diversity constructs into the theory and practice of school leadership, models must be developed that describe how leadership can approach conflict and diversity as creative forces. As he noted:

> Heterogeneous cultures risk greater conflict, but they also contain stronger seeds of breakthrough. . . .In complexity theory terms, if you avoid differences you may enjoy early smoothness, but you pay the price because you do not get at the really difficult issues until it is too late. (pp. 22–23)

By studying school leaders who were considered proactive in developing positive interethnic communities, Leading for Diversity Project researchers hope to develop such models and to contribute to the integration of multicultural and antiracist theory in school leadership. Although our data gathering is now complete and a final report on the study is available (Henze, Katz, Norte, Sather, & Walker, 1999), we nonetheless consider our efforts to be works in progress. The set of articles presented here in the *Journal of Negro Education* provides descriptive stories and analyses of how specific leaders in schools across the U.S. addressed conflicts related to race or ethnicity and worked to build greater respect and understanding among diverse members of their school communities. However, our analysis of this database and the theory building associated with it continues to expand.

METHODS

The Leading for Diversity Research Project study spanned three years (from 1996 to 1999) and sought to answer two key research questions:
(1) How do school leaders or leadership teams address tensions and conflicts that may be related to race or ethnicity? and
(2) How do school leaders or leadership teams bring about unity rather than division among different racial/ethnic groups on campus?
To answer these questions, Project researchers used a qualitative, multiple-case-study design to describe approaches and processes used by school leaders in different contexts. Nine sites were located in the San Francisco Bay Area and 12 in other parts of the U.S., for a total of 21 sites, including elementary, middle, and high schools. Sites were selected through a nomination and screening process. Altogether, we received 90 nominations, from which we selected 21 sites. To be considered for the study, schools had to have (a) a racially/ethnically diverse student population, including at least three major groups;

(b) a tangible history of interethnic conflict either in the school or the surrounding community; and (c) leadership that was implementing proactive approaches to address racial/ ethnic conflict and improve interethnic relations. In selecting schools from among those nominated, we sought to ensure contextual variation in such features as size, geographic location, leadership structure, and the presence of certain ethnic groups.

The final database was very large for a qualitative study. Data collected at each site consisted of transcripts of interviews conducted with 1,009 individuals from a variety of role groups (e.g., administrators, students, teachers, parents, instructional assistants, non-instructional staff, and community members); field notes from observations of 441 classes and key events that illustrated the schools' approaches to interethnic relations; and various documents and records from or about the schools that pertained to the study questions. Case reports describing the approaches used at each school were later subjected to cross-case analysis to help us discern any differences, similarities, and patterns related to our research questions.

SHARED ASSUMPTIONS

It is important to state several assumptions that we share as a group. First, although the Leading for Diversity Research Project focused on interethnic relations, we believe that an underlying commonality could be found among all forms of intolerance and oppression, whether people are the subject of harassment because of their race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, physical disabilities, or any other kinds of difference. Our focus on race/ethnicity is in no way meant to imply that other forms of intolerance and oppression are unimportant. Second, we maintain that the term "race" is itself problematic. Anthropologists have demonstrated that the concept of separate human races is not biologically valid (American Anthropological Association, 1998; Montagu, 1942/1997). They have shown that more genetic differences exist among members of the same "race" than between members of different races. Notwithstanding, race continues to play a significant role as a social construction and has been used since the mid-18th century to justify officially established doctrines of discrimination and genocide (Montagu, 1942/ 1997). Thus, although race as a biological category has been discredited, people's beliefs about race continue to have major social consequences. When we use the term "race" in these articles, we do so in the sense of race as a social construct, not as a biological fact. Third, we began this Project with the assumption that leadership is not limited to those in positions of authority. Schools often have teachers, counselors, students, parents, and others who play leadership roles. For this reason, several of the articles in this issue document cases of school leadership by people other than the school principal.

THE AUTHORS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS

Despite the common point of origin and shared assumptions noted above, each article contributes a unique point of view and is based on data from different school sites. In the lead article, Edmundo Norte provides a strong theoretical base that helps to explain the leadership approaches used at several Leading for Diversity Project schools. Norte reveals how five distinct areas of intervention—content, process, structure, infrastructure, and staffing—helped these schools to develop more positive interethnic communities. He also examines how school leaders defined and used their power and authority as well as determined their priorities. Ernest Walker focuses on describing the different kinds of racial/ethnic conflict reported at four Project schools. Although he observes that change efforts focusing on multicultural or antiracist education can in some cases instigate or exacerbate conflict, he also notes that incidents of interethnic conflict, if handled well, can

represent turning points or growth opportunities that in turn lead to positive changes within schools. In her article, Anne Katz describes the efforts of two elementary school leaders who worked to create more personalized linkages among schools, children, and families at their respective sites. Katz argues that this personalization of schooling helped the schools' staff move away from cultural and racial/ethnic stereotypes, led to greater understanding of students' needs, and improved the delivery of services to meet those needs. For her part, Susan Sather examines two high schools and three sources of leadership: that of administrators, teachers, and students. One of the schools in her study had a decided focus on race, ethnicity, and culture, while the other, a large school, placed more focus on academic achievement and on breaking the school into more personalized units. Both schools, however, were successful in enhancing human relationships across ethnic and racial lines. My own article, the last one in this set, describes the work of a multiracial, multiethnic group of teacher leaders at a large high school. These teachers were successful in creating a number of curricular innovations, several of which involved major structural change that brought the study of ethnicity and interethnic relations to the center of the school's functioning. We are very fortunate to have our work reflected upon by commentary from Beverly Tatum, Dean of the College at Mount Holyoke College, whose work in race relations and identity development has inspired much thoughtful discussion in our group over the years that we have worked together.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS RESEARCH TO THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN OF COLOR

The authors are grateful to the *JNE* for providing us with an opportunity to share research that speaks directly to the need for *all* schools to create safe, secure, and respectful environments for learning. Though the idea that all children should be able to achieve their highest academic potential is held up as a goal in the United States, academic learning is not likely to occur when the young people in our schools, or the adults who work with them, fear for their physical safety or experience harassment and name-calling based on negative perceptions of their race, ethnicity, language, or other markers of "difference." Adults and children of African descent in the U.S. are all too familiar with these experiences, but they are not alone.

Not long ago, I asked a group of graduate students in education if they believed that schools could be vehicles for improving race relations. A significant number of students, about 20%, said "No." They explained that there were too many institutionalized forms of inequality, including tracking, unequal access to resources, and shortage of qualified teachers, especially in urban schools. They are correct—schooling as it exists now is part of the problem that gives rise to racial/ethnic conflict in the United States. At the same time, the authors of these articles have all seen examples of strong leadership with a focus on improving interethnic relations, furthering social justice, and making a clear difference in the safety level and degree of respect experienced by students and adults at school. For us, these leaders demonstrate that schools where children are unsafe and subject to harassment because of their race or ethnicity need not be tolerated. If it is possible for school leaders to make this difference, then a disturbing question remains: Why aren't all school leaders doing this in their schools? One answer is that leadership preparation programs do not devote enough attention to leaders' roles in improving racial/ethnic relations. We hope that the research we share here and elsewhere will encourage those who prepare school leaders to make a focus on interethnic relations a vital part of their programs.

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Rosemary C. Henze,
ARC Associates

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