Culturally responsive pedagogy: Reflections on mentoring by educational leadership candidates

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Authentic field experience is an important component in educational leadership programs. This article revisits the literature examining the cultural gap that exists in public education, while taking a closer look at what it means to be a culturally responsive leader and teacher. The need to integrate culturally responsive practices to connect and encourage success for our increasingly diverse student population continues to persist (Gay, 2000, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2001, 2009). This study examined the experiences and reflections of six educational leadership candidates while they mentored teacher candidates. The candidates were also women of colour (Black and/ or Latina), who were selected by faculty based on academic performance. Using literature focused on cultural responsibility pedagogy and leadership, the educational leadership candidates attempted to apply culturally responsive practices both as the role of future administrator and instructional leader throughout their clinical experiences. The action research method allowed educational leadership candidates to serve as the researchers and participants actively searching for better or different routes to culturally lead and teach effectively in inner city school predominantly taught and led by white teachers and principals. The educational leadership candidates and the teacher candidates engaged in lively discourse about pedagogy, practice, and support that promoted cultural responsibility. The data included observations, informal interviews and reflective analysis based on the literature used during the semester.

Introduction

As a teacher educator, I am regularly asked about the future of our education system, with specific questions surrounding our nation's schools in communities of colour, especially from my students of colour. In conjunction with reviewing the research behind the effects of having teachers and leaders of colour in schools with a community of students of colour, I co-led a pilot program wherein I supervised and observed six New York City teachers of colour enrolled in our educational leadership program. The overall purpose of the pilot was to examine a collaborative project conducted in three departments within the division of education in a racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse urban public university. The collaboration was designed to enrich the field experiences and practica of pre-service teachers and educational leadership candidates in connection to two locally mandated assessment and/or evaluation tools: the Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity's (SCALE) *Teacher Performance Assessment* (edTPA) (SCALE, n.d.) and Danielson's (2013) *Framework for Teaching*. The collaborative clusters project was designed to provide opportunities for future educational leaders to mentor and support prospective teachers, with a particular focus on the understanding and implementation of Common Core State Standards (CCSS), an educational initiative in the United States that details what K–12 students should know in English language arts and mathematics at the end of each grade, edTPA, and Danielson. For this particular study, the educational leadership candidates were the focus of this research. In addition, I also reviewed studies based on

both teacher preparation programs (Darling-Hammond, 2007, 2006, 2005; Sleeter, 1985) and educational leadership preparation programs and how these programs prepare students to be effective teachers and leaders in underserved communities (Burkhauser, Gates, Hamilton & Ikemoto, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Diverse responses to education in New York City

Up until January 2014, New York City's Department of Education had experienced momentous changes in leadership. Carmen Fariña, the new chancellor, has worked in the public schools for 40 years. For the past 12 years, New York City has epitomised this trend of educational leaders with very little classroom experience. Added together, the years of K-12 classroom teaching experience of the last three NYC schools chancellors — Dennis Walcott, Cathy Black and Joel Klein — was nearly zero (Jones, 2014). In addition to the rollover, one significant reform from the Bloomberg era was the reliance on standardised tests as the ultimate arbiter of student progress and teacher effectiveness. Furthermore, in the existing high-stakes, accountability-driven policy setting in the United States to raise test scores and standardise curriculum where urban schools are distressed, there is slight support from city, state, and national educational administrators to integrate multicultural curriculum and institute diversity policies in urban districts. Some would argue that culturally responsive leadership in the current U.S. context requires urban school leaders to respond to the underlying causes and results of the racial achievement gap in their schools (Johnson, 2007).

Culturally responsive leadership, derived from the concept of culturally responsive pedagogy, involves those leadership philosophies, practices, and policies that create inclusive schooling environments for students and families from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds (Johnson & Fuller, 2014).

Public education and culturally responsive leaders

Public education in many communities of colour continues to struggle. Committed and talented teachers persist, but they operate in a larger system designed to produce failure. It would be fair to say that the failure of public education in low-income communities of colour is overdetermined (Ingersoll, 2002).

Teachers presume to enter public school classrooms without the adequate training to effectively teach African American and other students of colour (Blanchett, 2006). In addition, they start teaching with very little knowledge of themselves as racial beings or of social groups outside of their own and are unprepared to identify, implement, or assess culturally responsive teaching and learning strategies (Juárez, Smith & Hayes, 2008).

While the student populations in U.S. public school classrooms are increasingly diverse - culturally, linguistically, ethnically, religiously, economically, and otherwise socially (Horsford, 2011) - the teacher and leadership population does not reflect this. These populations have also been described as the population teachers would rather not teach (Hayes, Juárez & Cross, 2012). Given that the teaching force is predominantly White

(Bireda & Chait, 2011), we must rely on literature and statistics to help us re-evaluate teacher and leader preparation programs to be more culturally responsive. In her review of studies on the preparation of teachers for historically underserved, multicultural student populations fifteen years ago, Sleeter (2001) found that, as a whole, White teachers brought little cross-cultural background knowledge and experience to the classroom. They also held negative stereotypical beliefs about urban children, lacked awareness or understanding of discrimination and racism, and used "colour blindness" as a way of coping with fear and ignorance (p. 95). Whiteness has long been understood to be the norm in U.S. society. The understanding was simply viewed in light of education about the "other" as key to developing cultural competence, whereas, cultural incompetence is a lack of knowledge about the "other" (Hohman, 2013; Yeager & Bauer-Wu, 2013). Consequently, learning about the communities' cultures to become more competent, is not enough if there is a lack of self-awareness. The process of reflection reveals that the more one is exposed to cultures different from one's own, the greater the realisation of how much one does not know about the other. This process is not a once-learned experience; the process of reflection is a life-long process (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998).

Purpose of study

The purpose of this study is to examine how candidates' reflective experiences in an educational leadership program can promote culturally responsive teaching and leadership in school buildings. Effective principal preparation, according to research, integrates coursework about school leadership with practical experience in schools so that aspiring leaders learn what's needed for the job, exercise those skills and apply the knowledge in a meaningful way, and receive feedback from experienced practitioners (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Cheney, Davis, Garrett & Holleran, 2010). However, there is still a lack of clinical experience for aspiring leaders (Wallace Foundation, 2016) and more specifically is the emphasis of the multicultural and culturally responsive skills needed by 21st-century urban school leaders.

Research questions

1. How do educational leadership candidates respond to culturally responsive pedagogy to improve leadership via revisited literature?
2. How can educational leadership candidates' reflective narratives improve the practicum experience in the educational leadership program?

Methods

The qualitative study consisted of observations and informal interview designs (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003). Using these approaches presented a more casual environment leading to more authentic responses and reflective narratives between the participants and faculty. The study resulted from several discourses between faculty and students about the quality of the program's curriculum around culturally responsive leadership and pedagogy.

Teaching data management and supervisory skills did not seem to be enough for students who were teaching in school communities in need of addressing and supporting the success of low-performing schools.

Participants

The educational leadership candidates in the pilot program were selected based on GPA (grade point average) for subject matter and grade level. Two teachers worked in elementary schools, one in middle school and three in high school (English, history, and science-math were not available). The focus for this study was on the class conversations based on topics covered, field experience, and observations of educational leadership candidates' interactions with the 36 pre-service teacher candidates (six pre-service teacher candidates per educational leadership candidate) from our campus. The pre-service teachers were selected by their advisors and supervisors based on their respective subject areas and GPA.

For this study, however, the pre-service teachers were not observed or interviewed. Table 1 provides a profile on each educational leadership candidate student.

Table 1: Profiles of educational leadership candidates

Candidate pseudonym	Teaching experience	Grades taught	Subject
Abigail	.10 years	9-12/	Science
Beatrice	.9 years	6-8/	General education
Cristine	.8 years	9-12/	English
Deborah	7 years	K-5/	Early childhood and elementary education
Evelyn	8 years	.K-5	
Farrah	7 years	9-12	History, early childhood and elementary education

Teacher and educational leadership programs continue to be analysed for best practices throughout the United States. For decades, The Wallace Foundation has been working with states and school districts to develop better ways to train, hire, support and evaluate principals and other key figures in schools (Darling-Hammond et al, 2007; Wallace Foundation, 2016). Like teachers in underserved communities, many aspiring educational leaders continue to question if pursuing a school building or school district leadership certificate is worth the time and effort (SREB, 2012). In 2006, Lopez, Magdaleno and Reis questioned what more can professors of educational administration do to develop new leaders who have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to close the achievement gap and who are capable of leading successful efforts to meet the challenges in today's schools. Their study suggested that graduates must provide bold, socially responsible leadership in schools and districts that ensure successful results for students that have been historically failed by leaders of schools prepared by states' universities. Their question still holds true for communities of colour who are not only under-serving their students of colour, but their teachers of colour as well. It is the duty of educational leader programs to best

prepare their candidates to be able to serve in all types of communities and truly lead in an impactful way.

Changes in the curricula

The required texts for the course were selected based on a preliminary discussion with the candidates about the climate of education at their own schools and what they had already learned while in the program. The topics ranged from leadership strategies, to having uncomfortable conversations, to understanding the difference between race/ ethnicity and diversity. The selected students were also aware that the majority of our faculty was White. Three out of seven identified themselves as Black and Latino. As it pertained to our program, I was one of the minority-represented and the only woman of the three faculty members. I identify as a multi-ethnic, Black woman.

Some of the literature I used in previous courses focused on identity and diversity in leadership roles. Many of these have been updated throughout the years, but I preferred to use the ones I had referred to previously, as they were still relevant. Some of the literature covered specific sections of diversity and understanding multiculturalism. These sections varied from the umbrella topic of race and its definition to class, space, equity, faith, language and culture (e.g., Helms, 2003); understanding and dealing with white privilege (McIntosh, 1990; Anderson and Middleton, 2010); understanding our own stereotypes and performance (Aronson and Steele, 2005); ethnic changes and instruction (Banks, 1981); and understanding the role of leadership (Howard, 2006). As an instructor with a strong knowledge of the importance of diversity, I also diversified the authors of the literature in previous courses to reflect the student body in the courses. However, this student body was different since the six women were not White.

Reflective narratives

In the past, I would go over the syllabi and state a disclaimer explaining the level of discomfort some students may feel when reading some of the literature. Two of the articles on the syllabus were to be read prior and discussed on the first day, namely *Creating culturally responsive schools* (Bazron, Osher & Fleischman, 2005) and *Preparing principals to lead the equity agenda* (Barbara & Krovetz, 2005). I realised after the second session that I did not open up with the usual disclaimer. These students also shared that these articles were covering areas of their own teaching experiences that they were aware of but never challenged the ideas presented. The first critical analysis assignment based on these articles was quite informative. Abigail wrote:

> How have non-White teachers and leaders continued to teach and lead communities that they cannot relate to? As teachers and leaders of color, we can quote Malcolm X and Dr. Luther King, Jr. but that will only continue to add to the anger and frustration of many of us [Black people] trying to be heard. In our first session, you spoke of many White philosophers who shared very similar educational philosophies we have been taught. One in particular was John Dewey. Dewey made a great point when he stated only those who have passed through such training, [as he did in Vermont], and, later on, have seen

children raised in city environments, can adequately realize the amount of training, mental and moral, involved in this extra-school life (Dewey, 1960). How can people born and raised in the middle-class understand their students and communities if they've never lived it? How can they lead by example without the ability of being culturally responsive? How can I learn from a leader who will never relate to me, even if we share the same social class?

Abigail's critique and questions of leadership and equity were not different from the others' in the class. Abigail identified herself as a Black Caribbean woman who wanted to teach at a school with children who looked like her and her own. However, she was still challenged on the unequal outcomes she witnessed as an experienced teacher. Like Abigail, Cristine and Farrah shared the same sentiments. Both are currently high school teachers looking to transition from their current teaching position to administrative roles within the district. Both are determined to use their attained theoretical and practicum knowledge to become empowered leaders of educational advocacy. While all six students shared their own personal upbringings ranging from working class to affluent, all shared the same struggle of being part of an era where White privilege was in existence and their voices together, were not loud enough.

Halfway through the semester and deeper analysis of the literature, it was clear that my students were not able to relate to much of what we were reading independently and in unison. They shared that the depth of appreciation for what diversity now meant to them as future leaders had transitioned from moving beyond to practising and leading as inclusive examples. This conversation was also the impetus for the educational leadership candidates to assist the pre-service teachers modify their own lesson plans to reflect a more diverse curriculum and instruction. This revelation also led Evelyn to share her own reflection as a first generation student attending school in New York City during the 1980s. In her reflective narrative, she shared:

> As a sophomore in high school, I came terms that I was now part of two worlds and cultures and that I had to identify with both. I accepted that being bilingual allowed me to simultaneously be bicultural and that there were more positives than negatives. As a college student attending a White institution, I did not feel the same way. After reading Ladson-Billings (2001, 2009), Ware (2006) and the classic DuBois (1920), I felt, at times that being the only Black student in the classroom reminded me of how different I was and that being bilingual and bicultural may not be as accepting as I thought in high school.

Evelyn's reflection prompted me to reintroduce them to Paulo Freire's book *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (1990). At this point, it was important for the candidates to understand how the sociological theories, which examine resistance, identity politics and internalised racism that often ignored and uncomfortable to discuss or taught. Applications of his approach have also been made for teachers working at other stages of learning (Finkel, 2000; Shor & Pari, 1999; Shor, 1987b) and learning in everyday life (Shor, 1987a) as well. Moreover, I felt compelled to expose them to the importance of "*conscientizacao*" by Freire (1990), the awareness of one's oppressed state and insight into the suppressive methodologies of the oppressors. This awareness is the foundation for liberating action that, when coupled with

reflection, creates *praxis*. *Praxis*, in turn, builds a sense of proactive responsibility in those who would engage in social change. This, from my perspective as a leadership educator, defines the means and ends of our pedagogy (Kaak, 2011). In a matter of minutes, all six students began reflecting on their current leadership skills and each shared their own experiences of how learned behaviors from their previous and current leadership examples were leading them to think about their own classroom and leadership approaches.

Nearing the end of the semester, we began discussing the importance of difficult conversations as teachers and leaders as it pertained to topics of race, diversity and culture. Considering the race and gender of all six students, their immediate request was about having these conversations with White colleagues who were to respond to them in the future. Our last assignments included Bell Hooks (1994), where she called for the liberatory pursuit of an "engaged pedagogy," and Ladson-Billings (2009), with her challenge to develop a "culturally relevant pedagogy," who have pushed the field of teacher preparation toward recognising and developing pedagogical approaches that promote the purposeful recognition of race in the classroom. However, even though teacher preparatory programs have evolved over the last several decades to better educate students about issues pertaining to social justice (Cochran-Smith, Reagan & Shakman, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2009), the field has been slow in its efforts to address the multitude of issues surrounding race and racism (Nieto, 2000).

The work of Singleton and Linton (2005), in *Courageous conversations about race: A field guide for achieving equity in schools*, provides a framework allowing leaders to develop the skills necessary to discuss issues of race and diversity. Seeking to push educational leaders beyond the "moral objections of racism," Singleton and Linton (2005) provided a set of applicable skills allowing leaders to work toward the "real, comprehensive, cognitive, and intellectual foundations of understanding" (p. 2). Utilising six related skills: getting personal, keeping the spotlight on issues of race, engaging multiple racial perspectives, keeping everyone at the table, understanding the history and definition of race, and addressing issues of Whiteness, the authors felt educational leaders will not only be able to address these issues, but allow for other topics that have been silenced due to the realities of inequity. Certainly, the personal strategies of each student had to be considered and through several class discussions, we considered the possibility of a few. Beatrice went on to sharing,

> Not only have I not been part of an empowered culture but, I continue to fall into mentally judging those in leadership who have not practiced what they too, have been taught. As a result, my students have been affected at some point or another because of my inability to provide effective lesson plans due to lack of resources or other leadership priorities that have little to do with pedagogy and more to do with educational politics. In the end, we continue to be oppressed because our pedagogy has been oppressed.

Beatrice proceeded to quote other scholars who shared her own sentiments about her experience as an educational leadership candidate. She went on and stated,

Up until now, I agreed with Tatum's (2007) claim about leadership in the twenty-first century requiring the ability to "interact effectively with people from backgrounds different from one's own" (p. 22). Unfortunately, educational leadership programs continue to lack a curriculum that provides a critical discourse focused on issues of race, racism, and race relations (Dantley, 2002; Hawley & James, 2010; Singleton & Linton, 2005).

Hooks (1994) recognised that as a nation that objects to the consequences of racism, our theoretical concepts are far from practical. Educational leaders continue to take part in the educational gaps related to inequities and lack of achievements as a result of the inequity; although able to acknowledge the race-related gaps in educational attainment, they often attribute educational inequities to external factors that exist beyond the school (Singleton & Linton, 2005). As a result, holding the external players accountable for internal issues adds to the existing issues needing attention within the schools and students' communities. While conversations encouraging the candid examination of race-related issues in the classroom present a unique challenge for teachers and their students (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Pollock, 2001; Schultz, 2003), there is simply no excuse for their absence in the classroom and as leaders. For too long, the lectures have become more rhetorical than action and our candidates are exiting our programs feeling this very notion.

Post sessions

Six weeks after the course was over, I went back to gather the results from the field notes gathered throughout the semester. These notes provided feedback about initial course expectations from the students' perspective, current exposure and experiences pertaining to lectures and their overall feedback about the course. Initially, students expressed what they hoped to gain from theoretical frameworks to practicum. They also shared how they were hoping to learn ways to practise leadership for current students via learned conversational tactics and not just topical themes. Beatrice, in particular, shared that she was tired of coming to classes and refreshing her mental library with literature that did not pertain to her everyday dilemmas of absent students, non-collegial faculty, and an unresponsive administrator. The responses from the first survey urged me to reflect on how our program was adding to students' preparation via courses and professional development.

Not surprising, the most popular and impacting literature was Freire's *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Halfway through the semester, Cristine shared that she began to question how critical she was being as a teacher of students whose pedagogical experiences have been limited due to the lack of resources. She lamented how much of what she was teaching was not only limiting her students' ability to challenge the curriculum, but how she too was becoming conditioned to teach the importance of finding an answer and not the process of finding the answer that was most suitable for the student. Cristine shared how much of what she was now analysing was different, yet the same. This student had shared that some of these articles were introduced to her earlier as an undergraduate and graduate student and that they no longer had the same impact on her as they did then. After re-reading authors like Steeler and Freire, this student shared how upset she was at her own inability to analyse her own educational experiences in the past. She proceeded by stating,

> After reading the work of these two authors, I am able to see how my educational and teaching experiences are interrelating. I was becoming part of Freire's "banking education" and assumed that those students who memorized without questioning the curriculum were critical thinkers. I did not realize that the students asking me questions were not asking because they didn't know, but because they were questioning what they were reading. These were teachable moments for me and I did not engage them because I was now part of the new matrix of educational attainment. Numbers meant more to me because my administration expected me to have a higher rate of passing students than a higher rate of intellectual students.

Like Deborah and Cristine, the other four students expressed how much power they felt they did not have in their current positions, and the lack of preparation they were feeling due to former educators and leaders. The realisation of not feeling empowered after obtaining years of formal education and being exposed to high pedagogical content that could have raised their own intellectual capital, if adequately prepared, led to resentment. These candidates had began to accept the realisation of their own strive to succeed within their careers. They realised the importance of opportunities and the importance of staying relevant as a teacher and future leader.

In analysing the last set of survey responses, the issue of how we prepare school leaders continued to surface. Throughout the semester, these students were able to recognise the challenges they were currently facing as teachers and future leaders. They also recognised their responsibilities as educators and the importance of increasing their human, social and educational capital. Abigail and Deborah raised an important area of discourse, when they mentioned that understanding theoretical and sociological dialogues were not enough to make sense of the continued inequities that persist at a time when they should not. Farrah did not oppose what she had read and revisited, but wrote,

> I have heard White and non-White teachers and administrators in my building admit to not holding the same expectations for all students based on state mandates. These teachers and administrators are constantly quoting Maslow's hierarchy of needs to blame student failure. They think that home issues are too harmful and that students cannot focus. These same teachers and administrators have also stated that this kind of empathy will only continue to hinder our students' ability to succeed and will fail. There are too many studies and workshops that have exposed the implications of the lack of higher order needs and the affects on students. Recognizing that poverty has a profound influence on academic outcome is not a new idea (Coleman et al, 1966; Noguera & Wells, 2011). Listening to these teachers and administrators reflect what today's policymakers and reformers continuously and boldly state that poverty is not an excuse. If the leaders of today are convinced with these ideas, then how can six of us combat the challenges we are being presented with? Policymakers are too busy creating policies that will probably be effective if they took the time to read Dewey's work.

Farrah's position was aligned with the overall goal of the pilot's intention to create a crosswalk between the Danielson framework, edTPA, and Common Core State Standards. All are policy-driven methods of assessing education performance. These methods have impacted classroom instruction, teacher evaluation and student achievement overall.

After reading the rest of the survey responses, it was clear that these students had utilised their lecture conversations with their practicum responsibilities. These students demonstrated a number of emotions, thoughts and ideas via assignments and surveys. Their understanding of the literature along with their own experiences led to several off-the-record conversations about their future in education. As postgraduate students, not only were their academic agendas more advanced as a result of the pilot, but their personal positions within the field of education were now shifting. During observations, the interaction with pre-service teacher candidates were very strategised and informed. Each of the educational leadership students promoted an environment of communication, reflection and dialogue. Their positions as 'leaders' demonstrated their abilities to speak with their mentees as individuals and as a group in ways that avoided room for miscommunication. Most impressive were the candidates' abilities to understand that race, ethnicity, culture, and gender were huge parts of their approaches. The mentees were quite impressed with the level of involvement, interest, and investment the educational leadership candidates provided. In a matter of 14 weeks, these students' academic and educational leadership curiosity assisted them in practising to become effective administrators and mentors to pre-teacher candidates.

After revisiting the students' critiques and feedback, the need to revise the syllabi was evident. Each student made suggestions about readings they thought had made an impact on their current and future positions. And so I did. Several of the new additions have derived from my own graduate school experiences as a student. The impact of Jean Anyon's *Radical possibilities: Public policy, urban education, and a new social movement* (2014) and *Ghetto schooling* (1997) demonstrate the results of situational and transitional leadership. Others like Freire (1970) and Delpit (1988), Nieto (2000), Banks (2006), and Ogbu (1978) continued to be supported by these students for two reasons; these authors were women and/or of colour. They shared the importance of reading literature and learning about theories that were relative to their own experiences.

When students are cognisant and have a heightened level of understanding of educational inequities and diversity, it is easier for educational leadership faculty to provide literature and learning tools that are not as simplified. Since these six candidates do not resemble the majority of textbooks our courses have provided in the past, it was critical for me to focus on the relationship between leadership and diversity. The impact of these areas contributed to understanding the impact of cultural responses of all educational players. Essentially, students were able to make the connection of the lecture with practicum independently by reflecting on their own cultural awareness.

Conclusion

These students did not echo the typical American teacher, but they did echo the students' population they worked with. After the courses, each shared positive and negative perceptions on their ideas of diversity, leadership, and culture and what that means for the future of education. These students were also aware that culture, while taught at home, plays a huge role in the way interactions among school leaders, teachers, staff, and

students take place. Abigail reflected by stating that as long as cultures are celebrated among all, diversity will be infused into the school culture and pedagogy organically.

This cohort of students did not represent the overall population of our program at all. As such, it was important for all of us to understand that while these conversations were comfortable to discuss among the group, the challenge was to practise these conversations with others in the program and at their schools. However, while these discussions were informative and at times resentful, the data based on diversity variables continue to shed light on the inequalities of education and leadership. Knowing that these teachers did not reflect the previously chosen literature, it was imperative to modify the courses in order to address the qualities of an effective leader. Similarly to the K-12 population now shifting, pre-service teachers are too. Sleeter (2001) suggested that although most research in multicultural teacher education examines how to prepare White pre-service teachers, much more could be done to bring into the profession teachers who culturally match the children in the schools. The same can be said for programs that recruit educational leadership candidates who reflect the children in their schools. Further research on the impact of educational leaders of colour on teachers and children of colour is needed.

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