

Administering Programs that Serve English Language Learners (ELL) & Diverse Populations

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Abstract

School leaders are charged to recognize the unique challenges of working with English language learners (ELLs). It is necessary to mobilize community resources, to work with constituents who do not speak English as their first language, and to know how to use online resources for building stronger student/parental relationships. Universities are challenged to work proactively to assist ELL students by integrating ELL administrator preparation into their programs.

The number of English language learners (ELLs) has grown significantly across the United States. English language learners lack much of the academic achievement in comparison to their peers. General education teachers often are not prepared to teach culturally and

linguistically diverse children due to their lack of pre service teacher preparation (Grossman & Beauprem 2001; Menken & Antuez, 2001).

Principals are responsible for leading schools filled with children of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, including students who enter schools with limited or no English language skills. The children of these families are not accustomed to the public educational norms and these students often have holes in their learning due to an interrupted education. The students are required to perform on grade level on standardized and state-mandated assessments (Battistich, 2001).

Student Achievement

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of (2001) has refined the focus of education from general student success to individual student achievement. Just as teachers are under pressure to ensure student success, administrators are challenged to meet or exceed state target scores. A part of this challenge is to improve student achievement by focusing on subgroups, which leads to a personnel issue in regard to hiring highly qualified teachers and administrators who recognize and embrace the challenge of using effective instructional delivery (Ryan, 2003). By exploring the leadership parameters and conditions to support the literacy learning of ELL students, principals can make a tremendous difference in the lives of these children and their families (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003).

Historically, the academic success of the ethnically different learner has been uncertain. Even the United States, with universal elementary school access for over a century (1885–2005), has not realized equal learning achievement (Barton, 2004). The National Assessment of Educational Progress has consistently reported that the average eighth grade minority student performs at the level of the average fourth grade White student (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, 2003). Hale (2004) maintained that there are documented reasons for the achievement gap. He suggested the following are determining factors. First, the increased focus in education today is on teaching more academic content at an earlier age; this result of minority students' tenuous grasp of critical fundamental learning has exponential consequences. Second, teachers' lack of understanding of the children's backgrounds often results in lack of sensitivity in instructional delivery and poor connection to the curriculum content. This is true of children from poverty even though they are from the ethnically dominant national culture but it is compounded for children from ethnically and linguistically diverse cultures.

Inequity of preschool experiences exists for both sets of minority students, the linguistically and the economically challenged. A century of research on the educational achievement of students demonstrates the high correlation between the socio-economic educational background of the family and the educational progress of the child and youth. Impoverish neighborhood schools are more likely to have teachers with lower performing test scores. Grossman and Beaupre (2001) reported that minority children who live in the highest poverty neighborhoods and who attend the lowest achieving schools are approximately five times more likely to be taught by weaker teachers. This further compromises the probability of their academic success. However, researchers in several countries have shown that the schools' children attend *can* make a difference to their academic achievement, even after family

background, language, and ability upon entering school are taken into account (Raudenbush & Willms, 1991). This suggests that if school leaders understand the correlates of effective schools for diverse communities, they can help to overcome the multiple challenges to learning that their pupils face and improve the students' current and future academic success.

Tomlinson (2004) defined differentiated instruction at the basic level as the efforts of teachers to respond to the variance among learners in the classroom. Tomlinson posited that differentiating instruction means providing an environment where students have multiple options for taking in information, making sense of ideas, and expressing what they have learned. In order for differentiation to be effective, these processes must be proactive and purposeful.

Knowledge Base

Language, in all its forms, is how children make meaning of the world. The primary function of language is to communicate with others. It is also a means by which children learn and clarify thinking. Principals involved in the research are aware that oral language or languages serve as building blocks for reading and writing by allowing students to develop their understanding of concepts and the related academic language through talk. By providing frequent opportunities for students to interact with each other about important concepts, teachers help to ensure that ELL students are attaining proficiency in English as well as acquiring grade level content (August & Shanahan, 2006).

Teaching and leading in a diverse school community requires a knowledge base that includes cultural knowledge. Cultural knowledge here means an understanding of the importance of culture in affecting students' perceptions, values, and learning; linguistic knowledge—understanding of students' patterns of communication and various dialects/languages and how it affects their classroom learning; and culturally informed teaching knowledge—understanding of culturally sensitive classroom practices and strategies, student participation and engagement, and interactions.

Leadership

Harris (2005) defined distributed leadership as engaging many people in leadership activities. This idea of leadership highlights the interdependence of the individual and the environment. Distributed leadership implies that the practice of leadership is one that is shared, and realized within extended groupings and networks. Harris wrote that some groupings will be formal, while others will be informal, but challenged. Teachers, parents, students, and administrators to work together to solve problems, and engaged in leadership practices.

Teachers can share leadership responsibilities and help to build capacity. Harris (2005) maintained that a distributed perspective on leadership moves away from concentrating on those in formal leadership positions to consider leadership practices that occur daily through informal interactions and collaboration. This can help build leadership capacity within faculty members. Ryan (2003) felt that in order for schools to significantly impact student learning, school personnel must include the voices of community members. Ryan advocated that schools must go further than just distributing leadership; they must orchestrate conditions to alter past unjust

practices. This is best addressed through critical approaches to leadership which generally emphasize inclusion. Emancipatory leadership includes those who would not normally be included in leadership-oriented decisions and activities. Corson (2002) acknowledged the complexity leadership in diverse sociocultural situations and the need to seek out and utilize the expertise of community members and include marginalized groups in the decision-making circle. This is necessary because the dominant group may not adequately represent the interests of marginalized groups. Corson further cited the importance for leaders to restrict their own power and allow for debates and democratic decision making.

One of the main areas in which administrators believe they can affect the greatest change and positive impact on student achievement is through hiring strong teachers. Harris (2005) found that principals were clear about their criteria for what constituted a strong teacher in a diverse community. Perhaps the most challenging aspect of working in a diverse community, according to principals, is negotiating the cultural differences of each group. Often the roles of men and women differ and responsibility of schooling may rest with one group. Sometimes it is actually the “grandfathers” who are making decisions about schooling, but they may not be fully informed about the choices (Harris, 2005).

Research has shown that there are subtle differences within the family regard to the education of boys and girls. This sometimes creates difficulties with the school. Ryan (2003) discussed how many principals in diverse communities were “*flying by the seat of their pants*.” The principals often knew little about some of the groups they encountered and had to scramble to acquire information they needed to make good decisions. The principals often knew little about gender-related values or privacy concerns of certain groups. Unfortunately, Ryan found that there were few places that principals could turn for support and inspiration.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In this new environment, the idea that all students should be acculturated to a single way of knowing or behaving is being contested by interest groups. The concept of *cultural pluralism* is receiving more serious attention as an educational ideal (Appleton, 1983). Researchers have focused on educational leadership as a means to help diverse students achieve their potential (Leithwood & Riehl, 1999). But current researchers have offered no answers as to the culture in which that potential is to be realized. Central to this largely academic controversy is language because language is the vehicle both for teaching and learning.

Approaches to improving or increasing minority parent participation in schools range from benevolent (teachers gaining cultural sensitivity) to critical (school-wide reform). Some benevolent approaches have failed to recognize structural barriers that impede the participation of minority parents in school. Dei (2000) argued that school-wide reform is needed to interrogate and eliminate inequitable practices and structures.

School is one place where divergent understandings of education converge on a daily basis. It seems reasonable to think that schools would be places where differing aims, values, ideas, and concerns would be collectively discussed and a reasonable understanding or compromise reached. Unfortunately, this has not been the case (George, 2002). The reasons for this are many. Equality of opportunity and the equity of outcomes promised by public education

have not been fulfilled. The questions and concerns of diverse communities have not been addressed.

Teaching and leading in a diverse school community requires a knowledge base that includes cultural knowledge, linguistic knowledge, and culturally informed teaching knowledge. The movement towards a professional learning community is one way to address this need. The development of schools as professional learning communities helps to improve teaching quality and, in turn, raise student achievement. In this environment, teachers support each other as they develop best practices and share effective methods and pedagogy (George, 2002). This can be an important strategy in all schools, but it is particularly pressing in diverse communities where other resources may be limited. Principals have important roles to play in the development of professional learning communities. Principals must be attentive to teacher development on issues of inclusiveness and language development in the ELL learner. They must also work to create and sustain networks of conversation in their schools around issues of teaching and learning, with particular focus on the needs of diverse language learners (Battistich, 2001).

Summary

Principals have the tasks of creating conditions and practices within the school that address the needs of diverse students. One of the critical factors identified as contributing to school effectiveness is the principal's instructional leadership (Leithwood, 2003). This challenge necessitates building classrooms and schools in which community is genuine, work is meaningful for all students, diversity is appreciated and respected, and change is empowering.

Principals have a role to play in working toward classroom practice that is experiential; students must explore their own experiences as a source of learning about equality. Since competition maintains inequality and cooperation fosters equity, principals must work toward classroom norms, and in turn school norms, that are cooperative. Leaders in diverse communities must cultivate cooperation, communication, and interpersonal understanding in all aspects of school life.

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