



Valuing Diverse Contributions Across the School Community

Jessica Navarro, Ph.D. Student

School Improvement, Texas State University

Though schools are increasingly more diverse, challenges remain in supporting females obtain leadership roles and responding to cultural differences. District and campus leaders can implement collaborative practices that promote a positive school culture across genders and ethnicities. These strategies include authentically engaging stakeholders in decision making and facilitating a learning organization to better meet the needs of all educators and students.

Lack of Women in Educational Leadership

Societal practices reflect the way gender characteristics are perceived. Despite similar percentages of women and men's education and employment levels (Healey et al., 2019), there are significantly fewer females in educational leadership positions than males. For instance, in 2021, the U.S. Department of Education reports that only 25% of existing teachers are male which is consistent with Texas's educator workforce statistics (Texas Education Agency, 2021). To this effect, Healey et al. (2019) explain that the "glass escalator" is when men are employed in what are considered traditionally female roles, such as teachers or nurses, but are "often fast-tracked to the upper-level (higher-paying) spots in their profession" (p. 414), despite other females who may be more qualified. As Levi (2017) asserts, these inequities are compounded by differences in how men and women are perceived across cultures.

Responsiveness to Cultural Differences

Schools around the United States continue to wrestle with ensuring educator and staff backgrounds and cultures are represented while minimizing tension and divisiveness. Martinez et al. (2016) highlight this need in the Latinx community, explaining that “students, parents, and communities are hungry, waiting in anticipation for school leaders that not only understand their struggles and lived experiences, but who also look like them, and value, respect, and speak their language” (p. 12). Educators and students alike may encounter stereotypes due to their cultural identities. For example, some teachers do not understand that students from Mexico may have been raised with a more distinct hierarchical structure which influences the way they show respect (e.g., not making eye contact with the teacher). While these are often instances of educators who are unfamiliar with or misunderstand cultural differences, they can also reflect underlying root causes. Therefore, these challenges present learning opportunities for adults in designing strategies that cultivate a positive culture.

Strategies for Implementation

Across the educational landscape, leaders examine different approaches to make the best choices for their communities. Successful school leaders implement efforts to understand and appreciate unique experiences and perspectives through genuine connections with staff, students, and families (Grissom et al., 2021). These strategies include making decisions based on an array of perspectives and facilitating organizational learning.

Authentically Engaging Stakeholders in Decision-Making

Leaders can promote equity by establishing a clear vision with input from all stakeholders and aligning school operations and initiatives with that vision (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2019). As Banks et al. (2001) explain, “too often schools talk about democracy

but fail to practice shared decision making. Powerful multicultural schools are organizational hubs that include a wide variety of stakeholders” (p. 202). This begins with facilitating meaningful conversations to identify diverse perceptions about district needs and potential solutions. Through this practice of open dialogue, leaders can bring awareness and responsiveness to gender and cultural differences.

Environments that encompass social, emotional, intellectual, and physical safety can foster reflection and transformative learning (Biniecki & Kang, 2014; Osher & Berg, 2018). For example, leaders can utilize social emotional learning strategies to develop self-awareness and empathy, manage emotions, build relationships, and cultivate individual and collective efficacy, leading to increased cultural competence. It is important that female teachers trust that they can share the barriers they face in taking on leadership roles, and also that leaders are open to receive and respond to these barriers. District and campus leaders can model a collaborative, transparent, and safe environment where educators and students feel valued and are authentically engaged in sharing diverse perspectives to address identified needs.

Facilitate a Learning Organization

Healey et al. (2019) remind us that “our understandings are limited by who we are, where we come from, and what we have experienced” (p. 488). Just as it is important for educators to provide support to students that is relevant and responsive to where they are at in their educational journey, the same is true for administrators to engage teachers in this learning and reflection. It can be helpful for adults to recognize that learning occurs across a multitude of areas in order to appreciate other learners’ experiences and actively create space for new ideas. For example, Biniecki and Kang (2014) explain that “we can miss precious teaching moments if we do not thoroughly examine the varying cultures students bring with them to the classroom

and think about how to utilize these cultures to their strength” (p. 135). Thus, schools can change the narrative by focusing on assets instead of deficits.

It is also important to recognize different values and ways of knowing, as people continuously acquire new information that influences how we “know” something to be true. In particular, the learner’s prior experiences, readiness and motivation to learn, and opportunities to discuss and reflect are important factors to consider when designing adult learning opportunities (Biniecki & Kang, 2014; Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). In addition, school leaders must balance other factors, such as information overload or other time commitments, which can influence the priority that educators place on engaging in this work. Accordingly, district and school leaders can embed and scaffold new learning and reflection over time to ensure practices are aligned and sustained with existing initiatives.

Conclusion

Schools can act as a vehicle to further educational success by leveraging assets across cultures and genders. As a result, educators and students can develop healthy relationships and feel valued in their contributions to the school community. The hope is that these efforts will become engrained in the school culture to better meet the needs of students.

Reflection Questions for Practitioners

1. How can district and school leaders ensure that their communication strategies clearly convey the intended message and create safe spaces to discuss diverse perspectives?
2. What other strategies can district, and school leaders, use to help teachers and students feel valued?

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BIOGRAPHY



JESSICA NAVARRO is a third-year PhD student in School Improvement. She has a master's degree in public administration and bachelor's in international studies. She has been in education for almost 20 years across roles including project director, program evaluator, and business operations.