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CULTURALLY RELEVANT LEADERSHIP FOR COMPLEX 21ST-CENTURY SCHOOL CONTEXTS

FLOYD D. BEACHUM

Lehigh University

Now more than ever, it is obvious that the American educational system has some serious flaws with regard to structure, funding, disposition of educators, and attitudes, which lead to qualitatively different school experiences for students (Gay, 2000; Kailin, 2002; Kozol, 1992; Obiakor & Beachum, 2005). In a 2006 book titled *The Covenant With Black America*, Edmund W. Gordon wrote:

> Without question, education is the key to progress and prosperity in the United States today. Whether fair or not, educational opportunity and academic achievement are directly tied to the social divisions associated with race, ethnicity, gender, first language, and social class. The level and quality of educational attainment either open doors to opportunity or close them. (p. 25)

From this assertion we understand the importance of education in American society, and at the same time we are made aware that our various social identities can also play a role in increasing inequities (or privileges) that ultimately impede the progress of many (Cox, 2001). Interestingly enough, these social divisions do not readily lend themselves to the language or rhetoric found in the commonly espoused American ideology.

The commonplace rhetoric in America revolves around such idealistic concepts as freedom, justice, equality, and democracy. The Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of the United States reads:

> I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to The Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

One would obviously note that the promise of liberty and justice is stated for all. However, a glance at almost any urban area would greatly place much of this rhetoric in doubt. It is in these areas where we find many urban schools, now more than ever, attended by students of color (Irvine, 2003;

Kozol, 2005; Obiakor & Beachum, 2005; Yeo & Kanpol, 1999). Consequently, these students are at risk of being shut out of the progress and prosperity mentioned by Gordon (2006) and promised by the very documents on which this nation is founded. American schools have a stake in preparing citizens to function in a democratic society (Dewey, 1960; Glickman, 2004). Teachers in classrooms and educational leaders must rethink their commitment to the proper preparation of all students. However, the challenge is not only for schools within the United States. Technology, information sharing, and global awareness have brought geographically distant nations much closer today. Past ideologies of independence are being replaced with notions of interdependence. As nations work together, they also must recognize their shared struggles. In education, the struggle to holistically educate students in the face of natural disasters, poverty, bigotry, politics, war, strife, and cultural hegemony is a global concern. All nations share certain aspects of this struggle.

This chapter has multiple purposes: first, to place educational concerns in a global context and briefly trace recent educational history regarding the promise and plight of students of color with and without special needs from *Brown vs. Board of Topeka, Kansas* to the 21st century. The secondary purpose is to define and describe the concept of culturally relevant leadership (CRL) according to relevant literature. Finally, the author will provide implications for teacher leaders and administrators.

A WHOLE NEW WORLD

Today's global environment has started to lean toward more collaborative networks. This is evidenced in the language of global community, internationalism, and world village, to name a few (Friedman, 1999). Technological advancement and knowledge expansion have significantly enhanced our ability to communicate. This has incredible implications for schools and school leaders. Characterizing this context, Pink (2006) wrote,

> For nearly a century, Western society in general, and American society in particular, has been dominated by a form of thinking and an approach to life that is narrowly reductive and deeply analytical. Ours has been the age of the "knowledge worker," the well-educated manipulator of information and deployer of expertise. But that is changing. (p. 2)

This change not only highlights the need for more conceptual, purpose-driven, and creative thinking, but also acknowledges the necessity for working across national, linguistic, and cultural boarders.

A MORE DIVERSE SOCIETY

In the 21st century, the rationale for effectively dealing with diversity is evident. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2000) data alert us to the fact that students of color represent one out of every three students enrolled in elementary and secondary public schools. Villegas and Lucas (2002) asserted, "the United States is becoming more racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse than ever, a trend that is expected to continue well into the twenty-first century" (p. 2). Changing demographics across the American educational landscape present significant challenges for teachers and educational leaders (Beachum & McCray, 2004; Madsen & Mabokela, 2005). Educators now find themselves in a situation marked by ambiguity and complexity amid incredible opportunity.

In today's society, we must deal with this increasing and what some might consider encroaching diversity. The United States has always had multicultural, multilingual, and multiexperiential groups; only in recent years has the rhetoric of a true democratic society started to apply to all. A working definition of diversity is as follows: "the variation of social and cultural identities among people working together in a defined setting" (Cox, 2001, p. 3). The new emphasis on diversity is social and economic. As a social imperative, diversity is necessary because it promotes harmony in our everyday existence. Cornel West (1993) warned:

> We simply cannot enter the twenty-first century at each other's throats, even as we acknowledge the weighty forces of racism, patriarchy, economic inequality, homophobia, and ecological abuse on our necks. We are at a crucial crossroad in the history of this nation—and we either hang together by combating these forces that divide and degrade us or we hang separately. (p. 159)

Advocates of diversity (and multicultural education) assert that it encourages understanding, encourages a better organizational climate/school culture, acknowledges equity, and fosters excellence (Beachum & McCray, 2004; Beachum & Obiakor, 2005; Cox, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Tatum, 1997). Recognizing and appreciating differences across race/ethnicity, class, gender, and other social identities is the mark of social responsibility and a proactive perspective.

There is an economic imperative for dealing with diversity. Cox (1994) notes that organizations that wish to maximize their productivity should effectively manage diversity. The rationale is that when all members of the organization feel wanted, appreciated, comfortable, and their contributions and thoughts are affirmed, then the organization can operate at optimum levels. Thus, businesses will see more profits and schools would see greater levels of student engagement and cooperation. Furthermore, Cox (2001) writes, "Well-managed diversity can add value to an organization by (1) improving problem solving, (2) increasing creativity and innovation, (3) increasing organizational flexibility, (4) improving the quality of personnel through better recruitment and retention" (p. 6). Benefits such as these are advantageous to almost any organization.

One might logically ask the question, why or how did we get to this point of where we need to emphasize diversity? How did things get to be this way? To answer these concerns, a sociohistorical analysis is needed.

A Brief Sociohistorical Background of Urban Schooling

The landmark Supreme Court case *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* (1954) is well known in educational circles. It is credited with striking down the previous insidious doctrine of "separate but equal," which largely applied to African Americans in the South. In addition, it assisted in fueling the engine of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. According to Obiakor, Obiakor, Garza-Nelson, and Randall (2005), "This case recognized that separate educational facilities were inherently unequal and unconstitutional. To a large measure, it failed to favor discrimination in school admissions and retention on grounds of race or color" (p. 20). Since this watershed decision and subsequent push for justice in all of society, American schools today seem to have lapsed back into a segregated state. This new geographic segregation is exacerbated and exemplified by many schools in urban areas. Factors contributing to this contemporary plight include migration, White flight, and institutional discrimination.

African American Migration

African Americans migrated in large numbers from the agricultural South to the industrial North during the early and mid-20th century. Jackson (1996) wrote, "From 1915 to the 1930s, 1.8 million Southern Blacks migrated to industrial cities in the North and Midwest" (p. 234). Similarly, Villegas and Lucas (2002) noted,

> In 1940, for instance, almost 80 percent of the African American population lived in the South, and 63 percent lived in rural areas; thirty years later, only 33 percent lived in the South, and 75 percent lived in urban settings. (p. 46)

Many moved with hopes of better access to jobs and opportunities, to escape the Jim Crow laws and lynching in the South, and/or to achieve a small piece of the American dream. Unfortunately, life in the North provided only minimal opportunities and a more nuanced and covert form of racism as compared to the South. Rothstein (1996) agreed, "Wherever they went however, they found the pernicious segregation system. This affected where they went to school, where they worked, and the type of employment they were able to obtain" (p. 163). This would eventually lead to another phenomenon that would increase the "geographic isolation" of people of color and their White counterparts called "White flight." White flight would be the next event in a chain that would isolate urban dwellers (mainly of color) and their schools.

White Flight and Its Impact on Schools

As the number of African Americans (and other people of color) began to increase in America's cities, the number of Whites began to decrease. Many Whites opted to move into suburban areas away from the cities. This became known as "White flight." Malcolm Gladwell (2000) borrows this term in his book *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*; he opined:

> The expression [Tipping Point] first came into popular use in the 1970s to describe the flight to the suburbs of whites living in the older cities of the American Northeast. When the number of incoming African Americans in a particular neighborhood reached a certain point—20 percent, say—sociologists observed that the community would "tip": most of the remaining whites would leave almost immediately. (p. 12)

This quote captures the essence of the attitude against racial integration. Consequently, the result would be exceedingly different schools: "The suburbanization of the United States has created two racially segregated and economically unequal systems of education—one urban, mostly for children who are poor and of color; the other suburban, largely white, middle-class children" (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 48). This process was protected by a system of institutional discrimination.

Institutional Discrimination and Educational Segregation

The cultural ethos of the United States is steeped in idealistic concepts such as rugged individualism, the Protestant work ethic, and the Horatio Alger myth (belief in the idea of going from rags to riches as applied to everyone equally). Such ideas are systematically ingrained into the psyches of nearly all Americans through sophisticated socialization (Harro, 2000). Institutional discrimination was actualized in the formation and proliferation of suburban communities and suburban schools. According to Lipsitz (2002), "By channeling loans away from older inner-city neighborhoods and toward white home buyers moving into segregated suburbs, the FHA and private lenders after World War II aided and abetted segregation in U.S. residential neighborhoods" (p. 64). He goes on to assert:

> As increasing numbers of racial minorities moved into the cities [often migrating from the South], increasing numbers of European American ethnics moved out. Consequently, ethnic differences among whites became a less important dividing line in U.S. culture, while race became more important. The suburbs helped turn Euro-Americans into "whites" who could live near each other and intermarry with relatively little difficulty. (p. 65)

The result is the evolution of today's suburban schools and the plight of many urban schools. Both are products of a social history that is more intentioned than episodic. This geographic isolation/segregation leads to different lives, experiences, and worldviews of residents, educators, and leaders.

> This spatial segregation provides most white teacher candidates [and leadership preparation candidates] with little opportunity for contact with people from oppressed groups, thus depriving them of a window into the day-to-day realities, concerns, interests, dreams, and struggles of these groups. (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 31)

In this situation it is easy to believe (if born into the right community) that success in life is totally dependent upon the amount of work one is willing to do to attain that success. It also breeds a kind of "social blindness" to the plight of others in impoverished communities. Commenting on this subject with regard to educators, Villegas and Lucas (2002) asserted:

> They lack an understanding of institutional discrimination, including how routine practices in schools benefit young people from dominant groups while disadvantaging those from oppressed groups; and they have an unshakable faith that American society operates according to meritocratic principles and that existing inequalities in social outcomes are thereby justified. (p. 32)

Lipsitz (2002) explained how institutional discrimination worked in a concept he called "The Possessive Investment in Whiteness." He wrote:

> The increased possessive investment in whiteness generated by disinvestment in U.S. cities, factories, and schools since the 1970s disguises as *racial* problems the general social problems posed by deindustrialization, economic restructuring. . . . It fuels a discourse that demonizes people of color for being victimized by these changes, while hiding the privileges of whiteness by attributing the economic advantages enjoyed by whites to their family values,

> faith in fatherhood, and foresight—rather than to the favoritism they enjoy through their possessive investment in whiteness. (p. 75)

Understanding institutional discrimination is a crucial aspect of correctly reading our society and adequately addressing society's impact on schools. The preceding quotes unearth the fact that schools are founded upon and promote similar idealistic concepts such as merit, hard work, and individualism, which is somewhat true, but only part of a broader picture. In reality, privilege, unearned benefits, and collectivism are very influential factors in schools (Schmidt, 2005; Singleton & Linton, 2006; Tatum, 1997). Villegas and Lucas (2002) stated that schools "are far from being the impartial settings they are professed to be" (p. 30). Similarly, Epps (2005) noted, "the quality of education available to children is based on the relative power, prestige, and wealth of their families" (p. 220). Thus, the harsh reality of American education is covered by a veil of individualism and meritocracy. Villegas and Lucas (2002) lifted the veil with this piercing assertion:

> Built into the fabric of schools are curricular, pedagogical, and evaluative practices that intentionally or unintentionally privilege the affluent, white, and male segments of society. Since schools mirror the culture of the powerful, the academic success of those who share in this power and the academic difficulties of those who lack access to it are not surprising. . . . And our belief in the meritocracy is further strengthened by the fact that some individuals from oppressed groups do manage to succeed academically despite the limited probability of their doing so. As a result, most people tend to explain academic success and failure on the basis of individual characteristics of the learner rather than institutionalized discrimination. (p. 30)

A New Framework for New Challenges

When describing culturally relevant leadership, it is important to note some issues that might confuse readers or obfuscate interpretations. The leadership as discussed in this chapter is in no way confined only to administrators. Scholars have established that teachers have significant influence in their classrooms and can make an impact outside of their classrooms as teacher leaders (Beachum & Dentith, 2004; Cranston, 2000). Leadership in this instance is broadly defined to encompass a diverse range of activities that take place in the school. Furthermore, there is evidence that collaborative efforts should be undertaken that bring together educational administrators and classroom teachers in a process of cocreation.

> Models and practices of leadership that facilitate the leadership capacities of others must be developed. School leaders have to build more collaborative and democratic arrangements with teachers and others to achieve the enormous ambitions of schooling and respond to students' diverse needs. (Beachum & Dentith, 2004, p. 277)

The following themes illuminate the pathway to making this a reality. All inquiry was geared toward both teachers and administrators.

Toward a Framework for Culturally Relevant Leadership

Culturally relevant leadership is a promising framework for educators. Villegas and Lucas (2002), in their work regarding prospective teachers, developed educational continua to foster an understanding of where these preservice teachers might fall along the spectrum. The three dichotomous frames are not rigid. Villegas and Lucas wrote, "The two ends of this continuum are abstractions; the views of teachers, prospective teachers, and teacher educators fall somewhere in between the two extremes" (p. 53). The applicable ideological poles are: social dyconsciousness–social consciousness, deficit perspective–affirming perspective, educator as technician–educator as change agent. Walker and Snarey (2004) presented an ethical matrix negotiating dual basic values, thereby creating emergent virtues. Thus, race + gender = liberation, resistance + accommodation = pluralism, religion + ethics = hope, agency + legacy = empowerment, and community + individual = uplift (p. 132). In this analysis, the relevant continua of Villegas and Lucas is utilized along with the notion of emergent themes as used by Walker and Snarey, the results in the culturally relevant leadership matrix as seen in Table 2.1. The major ideas include emancipatory consciousness, equitable insight, and reflexive practice.

Table 2.1 Culturally Relevant Leadership Matrix

	Social Consciousness	*Affirming Perspective*	*Educator as Change Agent*
Social Dyconsciousness	Emancipatory Consciousness		
Deficit Perspective		Equitable Insight	
Educator as Technican			Reflexive Practice

Emancipatory Consciousness

Emancipatory consciousness is a form of critical consciousness that is geared toward true liberty for all people. The consciousness aspect recognizes the fact that all educators are not aware of the inherent flaws in the American educational system. Villegas and Lucas (2002) asserted,

> Awareness of the pervasiveness and longevity of the inequities in schools and of the structures and practices that perpetuate them can be disheartening for prospective teachers [and administrators]. But it is essential that they recognize these realities. If they see schools through the rose-colored glasses of the meritocratic myth, they will unwittingly perpetuate inequities. (p. 58)

Teachers and administrators should work explicitly at raising consciousness levels to recognize the two-fold need for excellence and equity in education. Raising consciousness levels has been advocated by many educators and scholars (see Bogotch, Beachum, Blount, Brooks, & English, 2008; Freire, 1973; Kailin, 2002; Ryan, 2006; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; West, 2004). The liberation aspect of this concept was well described by Milner (2006) when he wrote,

> Completeness for the oppressed begins with liberation. Until liberation is achieved, individuals are fragmented in search of clarity, understanding, and emancipation. This liberation is not outside of us or created or accomplished through some external force. Rather, it begins with a change in thinking. (p. 85)

The essence of an emancipatory consciousness is a change in thinking for educators, making them realize their own power with students/colleagues and potential in society.

Equitable Insight

Equitable insight deals with educators' attitudes toward students. It shuns a deficit perspective—one that "believes the dominant culture is inherently superior to the cultures of marginalized groups in society" (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 35). Educators' attitudes and expectations can significantly impact students' school experiences (Beachum & McCray, 2004; Irvine, 1990; Kunjufu, 2002; Obiakor, 2001). This concept leans toward an affirming stance of students that acknowledges their uniqueness and diversity.

Students with special needs should be treated with the same respect and attention we give general education students. Equitable insight acknowledges this as well as recognizing other social identities. According to Obiakor et al. (2005),

> [W]e must begin to understand that traditional educational programs are loaded with discriminatory practices, unrealistic expectations, disproportionate representations, and illusory conclusions. It is important that we shift our paradigms and powers as we look for innovative ways to solve urban problems. (p. 29)

Culturally relevant leaders should assist people in the organization to understand themselves and their students. This requires not only the appropriate knowledge base (emancipatory consciousness) but also the proper attitude, especially when working with students of color and/or of different cultures/backgrounds.

What is being advocated here is an educational attitude that not only affirms student and colleague diversity but also seeks to incorporate and enhance true ideals of social justice and democracy.

Reflexive Practice

Reflexive practice is a form of educational praxis that is oriented toward change agency. A crucial component of this concept is for educators to view their practice as problematic. In other words, it views educators (teachers and administrators) as change agents who utilize culturally relevant pedagogy and practices for increased student success. Furthermore, the work of the educator is not viewed as strictly objective, but rather educators' work is connected to the surrounding community of the school and the external society at large. In reference to these educators, Villegas and Lucas (2002) insightfully wrote:

> They believe that, while education has the potential to challenge and transform the inequities in society, without intervention, schools tend to reproduce those inequities by giving greater status to the ways of thinking, talking, and behaving of the dominant cultural group. Those with this perspective recognize that teaching is a complex activity that is inherently political and ethical. They are aware that institutional structures and practices do not exist in a vacuum, but that people build and sustain them, whether consciously or unconsciously. (p. 55)

Reflexive practice overtly opposes the stigmatization and stereotyping of students and communities that could result from the aforementioned educational context in previous sections of this chapter for a bias toward action. This idea is similar to what Milner (2006) described as *relational reflection.* In relational reflection, teachers "think inherently about their own perspectives, beliefs, and life worlds in conjunction with, comparison with, and contrast to those of their students and their students' communities and worlds" (p. 84). In addition, Milner provided three guiding questions for educators: (1) Why do I believe what I believe? (2) How do my thoughts and beliefs influence my curriculum and teaching [managing and disciplining] of students of color? and (3) What do I need to change in order to better meet the needs of all my students? (p. 84).

Taken together, "emancipatory" consciousness, equitable insight, and reflexive practice are the components of an innovative educational idea entitled culturally relevant leadership. As a process, it starts with emancipatory consciousness, which encourages a philosophical/ideological change, leads to equitable insight, which is attitudinal in nature, and finally results in reflexive practice, which is a change in the way things are done in the school. Thus, the transformation toward educational "goodness" (Obiakor, 2001) encompasses change in knowledge, change in feelings, and change in actions.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The notion of culturally relevant leadership has implications for educational theory and practice. Theoretically, it builds upon a solid foundation of culturally relevant pedagogical research and then forges new understandings by addressing teacher leaders and administrators who impact the school as an organization. It also informs educators with regard to innovative knowledge, dispositions, and skills (see Table 2.2). Finally, culturally relevant leadership builds an ideological bridge between views of leadership and special education. Expanded notions of diversity encompass all students and their ability statuses. It is noted that additional research (qualitative and quantitative) in this area is needed to build even more comprehensive understandings with regard to this topic.

In reference to practice, recommendations can be made for both teachers and administrators. Recommendations for teachers include: (1) continual personal development in raising consciousness levels (e.g., reading diversity-related literature, attending diversity-based professional development programs/conferences, starting book clubs, organizing students or teachers for the purpose of advocacy); (2) the affirmation and inclusion of all students regardless of race/ethnicity or ability status (English, 2002; Hilliard, 1992; Obiakor, Harris, & Beachum, 2009); (3) breaking down ideological

TABLE 2.2 Culturally Relevant Leadership in Theory and Practice

Emergent Theme	*Knowledge*	*Disposition*	*Skills*
Emancipatory Consciousness	X		
Equitable Insight		X	
Reflexive Practice			X

and stereotypical barriers erected by society and uniting students, parents, and communities; and (4) actively confronting (as opposed to passively accepting) misidentification, miscategorization, and misassessment and advocating for integrated comprehensive services for all learners (Frattura & Topinka, 2006; Obiakor, et al. 2005). Recommendations for educational administrators include: (1) developing a school culture that supports culturally relevant pedagogical practices; (2) the affirmation and inclusion of all students, teachers, parents, and educational stakeholders (Lynch, 2006; Singleton & Linton, 2006); (3) the effective use of data to expose missassessment, disproportionate suspension/expulsion rates, race-based disciplinary trends, racially biased student tracking, and so on; and (4) providing resources to support the aforementioned efforts as well as the creation of time and space for teachers and administrators to reflect on their practice, engage in discussion/debate, and imagine as well as develop new and innovative school structures, programs, and activities. For all educators engaging in culturally relevant leadership, they must walk the talk; people must see them living out their educational convictions.

Culturally relevant leadership is a promising concept for closing the gap between educational rhetoric and reality. It ultimately encourages educational excellence combined with equity and has implications for school leadership locally, nationally, and globally. It has the potential to bring out the very best in our educators in today's schools.

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