

Diversity: A Contemporary Issue in Educational Leadership

By Emma Louie

Research affirms that the dominate culture in a society subsists through curriculum and instruction in educational institutions (Fraise, & Brooks, 2015). Schools in the United States have historically acted as establishments of perpetuation for prevailing social, religious and cultural norms through exclusive pedagogy (Smith, 2014). However, according to Frase and Brooks (2015) globalization is altering demographics and forcing educational leaders to respond to diversity in schools even in the least diverse areas of the country. Frase and Brooks (2015) maintain that this need to address diversity precipitates the need for culturally responsive leadership in our contemporary society.

Culturally responsive leaders must ensure that the entire school environment responds to diversity by meeting the educational needs of all students (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016, December). Blackaby and Blackaby (2011) assert that increased diversity is a contemporary issue that has complicated every aspect of American society and demands the need for spiritual leadership. The premise of this contemporary issue paper asserts that biblical principles provide educational leaders with an ethical framework that helps them avoid legal pitfalls and address societal expectations that fosters diversity through a responsive culture in schools.

Contemporary Context

Originating from socially reactive pedagogy because of increased student diversity less than two decades ago, culturally responsive leadership is predicated on beliefs and practices that generate an inclusive educational atmosphere with regards to individual student's cultural identity (Johnson & Fuller, 2014, May 24). This includes the promotion of high expectations by school leaders along with a curriculum that reflects the cultural experiences expressed within

student body (Fraise & Brooks, 2015). Johnson and Fuller (2014) advise that when tackling student diversity, educational leaders need to establish culturally responsive practices and policies that empower students and promote academic success. Khalifa, Gooden and Davis (2016, December) declare that educational leaders in the 21st century are pressed by society to effectively manage how student diversity impacts teaching and learning in their schools.

Educational leaders must also comprehend that how students reason, talk, and act are functions of the ethnic, religious, and social groups to which they belong prior to them entering K-12 schools (Fraise & Brooks, 2015). This heightened awareness of diversity should encourage school leaders to increase focus on specific student populations and support individual academic, behavioral, social and emotional needs, which usually extend beyond traditional curriculum and instructional practices (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016, December). Thus, culturally responsive educational leaders acknowledge the persistent gaps in academic achievement between majority and minority students groups and appropriately respond (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016). Smith (2014) characterize this effective responsiveness by school leaders as using the cultural knowledge, previous experiences, and learning styles of diverse student populations to construct a learning environment that is applicable and supportive of them.

Biblical Principles Connection

Writing from a Christian worldview, I trust that biblical principles are universal truths revealed within the scriptures of the Holy Bible. However, it is through spiritual leadership that individuals are able to understand how to apply biblical principles to the contemporary issue of diversity within their organizations (Bracken, Dean, & Gowdie, 2016). This is a major challenge for educational leaders according to Blackaby and Blackaby (2011) since “American society has grown extremely diverse and fragmented” (p. 9). Nonetheless, through the appropriate

application of biblical principles educational leaders can gain enough wisdom to be ethical, compassionate, and culturally responsive to increasing diversity based on student demographics (Ehrich, Harris, Klenowski, Smeed, & Spina, 2015).

Furthermore, Jesus Christ emphasized two important biblical principles that have vital significance for spiritual leadership (Bracken, Dean, & Gowdie, 2016). The first principle expresses the very purpose of humanity, which is to know, love, and serve God (1 John 4:8 & John 12:26, KJV) while the second principle instructs us to love and engage in peaceful relationships with those we encounter (1 Corinthians 13:4-7, KJV). Both of these biblical principles have profound use for how culturally responsive leaders engage with diversity. As stated by Blackaby and Blackaby (2011) effective spiritual leadership is the answer for problems resulting from diversity. Nevertheless, educational leaders must recognize that when they interact with laws established by organizations it is possible that such regulations can conflict with biblical principles and societal expectations.

Biblical Principles Conflicts with Legal & Societal Expectations

While the phrase separation of church and state is not actually stated in the Constitution of the United States of America, the fact that religion and secular educational organizations are separate entities is exemplified in the establishment clause and free exercise clause (Geier, 2014). The case described by Geier (2014) offered a convincing investigation into the First Amendment practices of a public school along with opportunities to evaluate the decision making of school leadership from numerous administrative and ethical perspectives. Based on the evidence, the results demonstrated that there are serious consequences when school leaders apply biblical principles in ways that legal precedence has established it to be in violation of the law to do so (Geier, 2014). Therefore, culturally responsive educational leaders have a

responsibility to be knowledgeable about the relationship between religious principles and the legal expectations that have been established by society (Bracken, Dean, & Gowdie, 2016).

As spiritual leaders educators must address diversity within their schools, especially public schools, within the legal constructs that are available to them. With the understanding that there are some occurrences where legal behavior can be unethical according to biblical principles as well as times when biblical principles may be considered illegal by authorities (Bracken, Dean, & Gowdie, 2016). Whether the behavior of educational leaders are considered prohibited depends on the existing governing laws and perceptions of society, yet this does not mean that the situation violates a biblical principle. The essence of recognizing the relationship between biblical principles, legal authority, and societal expectation encompasses the ability of educational leaders to navigate between doing what is best for students and adhering to guidelines and standards established by their profession and society as a whole (Geier, 2014).

Educational leaders must continue to strive to demonstrate spiritual leadership especially with their challenging and consuming responsibilities, because it is through biblical principles that they are able to replenish themselves (Blackaby & Blackaby, 2011). Bracken, Dean, and Gowdie (2016) reminds educational leaders that their spiritual nature is always present in public education as they go about their daily routine. Additionally, Blackaby and Blackaby (2011) assert that the spiritual breadth of leadership needs to be more intentional by school leaders if they are going to be able to successfully face the challenges of their institutions. Bracken, Dean, and Gowdie (2016) avow that even though society has enacted laws and legislation that intentionally separate public education and religious establishments by keeping church and state separate, there is no law that can separate biblical principles from spiritual leaders who seek the wisdom of God day-to-day in order to do their jobs effectively as educational leaders.

Personal Reflection on Diversity in Education

When I reflect on diversity as a contemporary issue in education, I am reminded of Romans 12:18 (KJV) where we are encouraged to live peaceably with everyone. However, many educational leaders are experiencing difficult struggles as they seek to harmonize different values, beliefs, and expectations that produce discord and low academic achievement within diverse student groups (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016, December). Therefore, I concur with Blackaby and Blackaby (2011) that there is a crucial need for spiritual leadership within the education community. Also, while on the surface it may seem that biblical principles conflict with laws and societal expectations, I do not agree with this assessment.

Since, biblical principles have authority over man made laws, therefore the laws established by society are the source of conflict. Additionally, I think that as educational leaders practice spiritual leadership they will have a greater capacity to affect change among a diverse student population because they will have access to the wisdom of God to guide them.

Conclusion

As educational classrooms become more diverse, relating to and respecting cultural differences is essential if educational leaders expect to ensure that all students in their care are able to succeed in school. Therefore, a culturally responsive school environment must go beyond the superficial of cultural celebrations, potluck dinners and trivial displays that offer a token of support to diversity. Finally, spiritual leaders must not have an oversimplified understanding of diversity and how important being culturally responsiveness is to students who come from minority cultures and must engage in a curriculum that was not originally designed from them (Johnson & Fuller, 2014, May 24). Spiritual leaders must embrace diversity and

their duty to ensure that all students are provided with an engaging culturally responsive environment where they can thrive, develop and succeed.

References

- Blackaby, H., & Blackaby, R. (2011). *Spiritual leadership* (Rev. ed.). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Pub.
- Bracken, T., Dean, A., & Gowdie, J. (2016). Critical leadership challenge: Spiritual formation in the contemporary context. *Compass*, 50(3), 7-13.
- Ehrich, L. C., Harris, J., Klenowski, V., Smeed, J., & Spina, N. (2015). The centrality of ethical leadership. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 53(2), 197-214.
- Fraiese, N. J., & Brooks, J. S. (2015). Toward a theory of culturally relevant leadership for school-community culture. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 17(1), 6-21.
- Geier, B. A. (2014). The wall between church and state begins to crumble. *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership*, 17(1), 45–58.
- Johnson, L., & Fuller, C. (2014, May 24). Culturally responsive leadership. Retrieved from <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199756810/obo-9780199756810-0067.xml>
- Khalifa, M. A., Gooden, M. A., & Davis, J. E. (2016, December). Culturally responsive school leadership: A synthesis of the literature. *American Educational Research Association*, 86(4), 1272–1311.
- Smith, D. (2014). Fostering collective ethical capacity within the teaching profession. *Journal of Academic Ethics*, 12(4), 271-286.