Principals' Conceptions of Diversity: A Study of Ontario Principals

Authors: Dr. Patricia Briscoe, pbriscoe@uwo.ca, Dr. Katina Pollock, kpolloc7@uwo.ca
Asma Ahmed, Cameron Hauseman, Michael Mindzak, Donna Hazel-Swapp

School principals face many challenges and competing priorities within a constantly changing environment. According to Harvey and Houle (2006) and Ryan (2006), one of these competing priorities that demand principals' to alter their approach to their work is increasing student diversity and conflicts of culture, race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. However, despite a decade of multicultural policies and the promotion of inclusive and equitable schools, there continues to be many inequalities. Considering that research indicates that next to teachers school leaders have the most influence in schools (The Institute for Education Leadership, 2008; Gordon & Louis, 2009; Louis et al., 2010), could school leadership be an acceptable focal point to understanding this lack of progress towards equitable schools? According to the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF), leadership is the exercise of influence on organizational members and diverse stakeholders toward the identification and achievement of the organization's vision and goals. Consequently if principals have limited rather than all-encompassing, false and/or misaligned conceptualizations of diversity, then does this influence their roles and responsibilities in leading their schools? Specifically referring to the OLF how does this influence the leader's actions in areas such as, setting directions, building the school vision, developing the school's values, supporting desired practices, building a school community, instructional leadership, pedagogical influences, school activities, environment, climate, and culture? The purpose of this paper is to examine principals' conceptualization of diversity and the influence on their leadership in their school communities.

Conceptual Framework: This paper supports the concept of Blackmore (2010) that leadership is values-driven, based on moral judgments and therefore one acts on values in order to change practice. If the values and judgments of diversity are narrow, limited, misaligned, false or in a deficit model, then this will influence a leader's action in their role of diversity. To fully understand how Ontario leaders construct knowledge concerning diversity, it is relevant to understand the historical foundations and framework of diversity in Ontario (Egbo, 2009; Harper, 1997). In addition, to understand the direction and purpose of the Ontario Ministry 2009 policy, *Promise of Diversity: Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy:* A document intended to provide a system wide approach to policies of equity and inclusion and increase the number of school boards and schools to construct and implement equity policies.

Method: The paper focuses on the initial phase of a study involving 59 school principals from seven different school boards in Southwestern Ontario. Below in Table 1 is an overview of participant characteristics. Overall, there was a range of 4 to 16 principals at each of the seven school boards in the study. Of the 59 principals, 46 had at least five years of experience, while only 13 were less than five. Forty-six of the 59 participants were employed in the elementary panel, with only 13 working in secondary schools. In terms of gender, 24 of the 59 principals were male, and 35 female. Thirty-nine principals worked in schools located in urban areas with relatively high levels of population density, while 20 worked in rural settings. Evidenced by the characteristics that the principals represented a range of different contexts, difference in levels of experience and gender.

Table 1: *Participant Characteristics*

School Board	Male	Female	Urban	Rural	Elementary	Secondary	EX*	LE**	Total
Number 1	2	4	2	4	5	1	6	0	**6**
Number 2	8	8	13	3	13	3	12	4	**16**
Number 3	1	2	0	3	3	0	2	1	**3**
Number 4	3	4	6	1	5	2	6	1	**7**
Number 5	4	5	6	3	7	2	6	3	**9**
Number 6	1	6	2	5	6	1	6	1	**7**
Number 7	5	6	10	1	7	4	8	3	**11**
Total	**24**	**35**	**39**	**20**	**46**	**13**	**46**	**13**	**59**

* EX – experience as principal for more than 5 years   **LE – experience as a principal for less than 5 years

The data was collected as a qualitative study from a larger study involving semi-structured interviews. Each interview was completed in one to two hours. The data was analyzed based on responses to the question concerning how the principal's work has been influenced by diversity. Data analysis was conducted in three steps. First, interviews were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Savin-Baden & Major, 2012), as transcripts were read with an openness to any recurrent themes. These themes became distinct codes, and each code was assigned a name. Next, the transcripts within each case were re-analyzed to identify data that was a good fit for codes developed prior to analysis based on the study's conceptual framework (Blackmore, 2010; Egbo, 2009; Harper, 1997; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Aspects of the conceptual framework acted as initial codes. During the third step of the analysis phase the codes were grouped (and broken up) into categories and subcategories (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2005).

Findings: Responses of principals' conceptualizations of diversity were grouped into four responses: i) no diversity-framed by no visible differences; ii) visible diversity –frames by either religion, race, sex, cultural; iii) economic diversity – framed by socioeconomic status; and iv) academic diversity – framed by gaps in academic achievement (i.e. special needs to academic opportunities). Principals of rural schools (20 schools) were more likely to suggest there is no diversity (no cultural differences) or attribute diversity to social economic status or academic differences. Where as principals of urban schools (39) suggested their school is diverse and mostly described diversity by the cultural differences.

These four areas led to identifying how principals perceived diversity influencing or not influencing their work. That is, if principals said there was no diversity, then they identified little influence on their work. Conceptualizations involving visible diversity – in term of cultural, religious, etc. - was stated as somewhat influencing their work by targeting specific areas such as an emphasis on celebrations of various cultures, providing non-English language newsletters. Academic diversity evoked responses that more emphasis was needed in their role to engage teachers and specialist in teaching and learning pedagogies to improve student learning. Lastly, social economic differences evoked the greatest influence on their work by dealing with issues of increased behavior problems and more involvement with community resources such as mental health, community supports, etc. Overall, these responses represented four categorical themes: concepts of difference; awareness but no actions; difference in sameness; symbolic reactions to difference.

Conclusion and Recommendations: These findings suggest that leaders continue to exhibit problematic, limited and non-critical constructions of diversity. This in turn affects how principals are leading their schools to more inclusive and equitable practices in the face of diversity. These findings provoke the question: What *should* principals understand about diversity to lead their schools to be more equitable and inclusive. And how *should* they gain such knowledge? Evident from these findings is that the majority of leaders epistemological view both ignores and perpetuates systemic and institutional barriers impeding leading inclusive learning environments. This in turn will affect how they lead their school in terms of setting direction, building pedagogical practices, etc; all of which correspond to the Ontario Leadership Framework.

In conclusion, considering principals have a profound influential role in the school, how they conceptualize diversity will impact how diversity is represented and influenced in their respective schools. The potential of these findings reveal a continuing concern for the future of equitable schools that should begin with principals and how they view diversity. The value of this research spurs evidence to generate a shift of emphasis in leadership development in the area of diversity and social justice. That is, transformative practices that focuses on increased critical self-reflection (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013; Mezirow &Taylor, 2009) and deconstructing knowledge construction (Banks, 2004; 2007; 2008; Howard, 2006). A focus that supports principals to develop a more all-encompassing conceptualization of diversity and conceptualizations that advances deconstruction one's sense making skills rather than perpetuation of systemic and institutional barriers that have continued to impede inclusive learning environments. This in turn will help principals develop leadership skills for diverse populations, as well as in the *absence* of diversity.

The link to where principals stand concerning diversity and the future direction for tackling the persisting issue of equity in education is vital. Clearly, this study relates to the theme of this years CCEAM conference as it highlights the necessity to (re)situate the direction of leadership development by a (re)evaluation of *self* construction and the impact upon actions in the role as a diversity leader in schools.

References:

Banks, J. A. (2004). Multicultural education: Characteristics and goals. In J. Banks & C. Banks (Eds.), *Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives* (pp.3-30). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Banks, J.A. (2007). *Educating citizens in a multicultural society*, (2nd ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.

Banks, J.A. (2008). *Race, culture, and education*. New York: Routledge.

Blackmore, J. (2010). Preparing leaders to work with emotions in culturally diverse educational communities. Journal of Educational Administration, 48 (5), 642-658. DOI 10.1108/09578231011067785

Egbo, B. (2009). *Teaching for diversity in Canadian schools*. Toronto, ON: Pearson Canada Inc.

Harper, H. (1997). Difference and diversity in Ontario schooling. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 22(2), 192-206.

Gall, J.P., Gall, M.D., & Borg, W.R. (2005). *Applying educational research: A practical guide*. Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.

Ghosh, R. & Abdi, A.A. (2013). Education and the politics of difference: Select Canadian *perspectives* (2nd ed.). Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars Press.

Gordon, M. & Louis, K.S. (2009). Linking parent and community involvement with student achievement: Comparing principal and teacher perceptions of stakeholder influence. *American Journal of Education, 116*(1), 1-31.

Harvey, E. B., & Houle, R. (2006). *Demographic changes in Canada and their impact on public education*. Toronto, Ontario: The Learning Partnership.

Howard, G.R. (2006). We can't teach what we don't know: White teachers, multicultural schools (2nd ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.

Mezirow, J. & Taylor, E. T. (2009) Transformative learning in practice: Insights from community, workplace and higher education. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Louis, K. S., Leithwood, K., Wahlstrom, K., Anderson, S., Michlin, M., Mascall, B., Gordon, M. et al. (2010). *Learning from Leadership: Investigating the links to improved student learning*. Final Report to the Wallace Foundation. New York, NY: The Wallace Foundation.

Miles, M.B., & Huberman, M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. London: Sage.

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2009). *Ontario's equity and inclusive education strategy*. Toronto: Author.

Ryan, J. (2006). *Inclusive Leadership.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Savin-Baden, M., & Major, C.H. (2012). *Qualitative research: The essential guide to theory and practice*. London: Routledge.

The Institute for Education Leadership. (2008). *Putting Ontario's leadership framework into action: A guide for school and system leaders*. Retrieved from http://www.education-leadership-ontario.ca/files/FrameworkAction.pdf