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Chapter 2

Central Office Leadership: The Importance of Promoting Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging in the Ivory Tower

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ABSTRACT

As a consequence of their multiple identities, underrepresented leaders often navigate both racialized and gendered pathways to leadership in the U.S. education industry. Nevertheless, relatively little is known about the impact of their intersecting identities and the structural barriers in this sector. To deepen our collective understanding of this phenomenon, the author reviews existing theories and research related to the intersection of race and gender within the educational leadership sphere. More specifically, the author highlights the individual and compounding effects of gender and race on the professional realities of current and aspiring leaders in education at the Central Office (i.e., the Ivory Tower). This chapter concludes by proffering future research propositions, theory development, and policy in this arena.

INTRODUCTION

Great leaders create a vision for an organization, articulate the vision to the followers, build a shared vision, craft a path to achieve the vision, and guide their organizations into new directions (Banutu-Gomez & Banutu-Gomez, 2007; Kotter, 2001; Parris & Peachey, 2013).

Mania-Singer (2017) conducted a qualitative case study, employing General Systems Theory and social network analysis as the frameworks. Exploring the relationships between district central office personnel and elementary school principals in an urban Midwestern school district, results revealed “sparse relationships between members of the district central office and principals, more opportunities for higher-performing schools to participate in decision making, and few opportunities for all schools to provide

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feedback to the district” (Mania-Singer, 2017, p. 69). Consequently, this ultimately leads to a hindrance of any school-level improvement efforts in this capacity.

In Gill’s (2018) piece, *Help from, yes, the central office: Supervisors work with principals on instructional leadership*, the general sentiment from district-level leaders was this: “There’s no guidebook on how to do this... Principals are still in charge of their buildings, but they can no longer do the job in isolation. It takes a total team effort” (p. 1). School districts across the country share that same sentiment. Under pressure to raise academic performance, many central offices are faced with redefining old positions – and/or creating new ones – that charge administrators with helping principals do their job better (Gill, 2018, p. 1). The titles, and accompanying duties, vary widely and include principal supervisor, managing principal, executive director, and assistant superintendent, to name just a few. It can be a juggling act for the person who must efficiently manage all of these roles and responsibilities.

Mitgang and Cummins (2013) concluded in their work, *District matter: Cultivating the principals urban schools need...*, that school systems across the nation are viewing better leadership as a “lever for school improvement and creating more supportive relationships with principals and their teams. Their efforts vary widely. However, what all have in common is a belief that when it comes to school leadership, ‘districts matter’” (p. 8). Also commonly agreed upon by school districts nationwide is the assertion that to improve education in even the most troubled schools, school districts must make the development of stronger school leadership a top priority.

According to these same authors, the role of district leaders has long been underappreciated. They assert that central office leaders are often:

Bypassed by reformers who believe the antidote to mediocre schools is to free them to manage their own improvement efforts with a minimum of regulatory interference and scorned by those who regard districts and their employees as money-draining bureaucrats more interested in rules than school renewal. (Mitgang & Cummins, 2013, p. 8)

While there is much documentation regarding the role of the school leader in establishing best instructional practices, school districts, naturally, play a critical role in nurturing this type of principal-leadership. This relationship is far too meaningful and far too necessary not to cultivate to its fullest potential.

The Role of an Effective Central Office Large-Scale

The inner workings of central office operations are complex, as district personnel face a myriad of day-to-day demands. Further compounding the matter is the constant uncertainty regarding district leaders’ specific roles, duties, and responsibilities. They are called upon to forge relationships with school personnel and invest in improving the teaching and learning environment, all while simultaneously developing partnerships with stakeholders and building their own leadership capacities. Generally, conversations concerning district-level procedures occur under conditions of ambiguity (Honig, 2008). In light of this, a substantial effort is being made to shift the role of central office leaders from regulatory business managers to agents primarily focused on supporting teaching and learning within their districts. This includes the momentum-gaining call for principal managers’ roles to shift from operations to instruction (Honig & Rainey, 2014).

The national response to this call involves a movement currently underway, one in which central office leaders are examining and working on revamping their roles as administrators. A growing number of

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districts nationwide, led by designated directors of professional development, also known as Instructional Leadership Directors (Augustine et al., 2009), are working to improve leadership for school improvement initiatives. This initiative aims to assist principals as they work to incorporate solid, tangible instructional leadership strategies into their own practices (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012).

Role of the Central Office – SDL (School District Level)

A regular challenge for central office leaders involves the tendency of certain school-based leaders to devalue the cooperative working/learning environment. In such instances, these principals miss out on the opportunity to learn and grow with their colleagues. This, in turn, causes members of the collective to miss out on the benefits of collaboration, as much time is wasted reinventing the wheel. Because district-level evaluations often serve as a gauge and guideline for principal-teacher assessments, the evaluative process can counterproductively reinforce the isolation that many school leaders often experience.

For this reason, central office leaders in my district identified that evaluations need to more effectively focus on the school leader's ability to develop cultures of team curriculum planning, assessment, staff capacity-building, and student learning. This is in line with the work of Marshall (2005), who encourages district leaders to prod leaders to emerge from their isolation and reflect with their colleagues on what they need to do to build cultures of success. The collective ownership and responsibility that results from working together must first be evidenced at the district level, for it serves as a vehicle for promoting engagement, interaction, and ultimately, growth.

Role of the Central Office – SBL (School Building Level)

The notion that principals should serve as instructional leaders in their schools and not merely as 'generic managers' is generally agreed upon among educators. Yet, only a few principals genuinely act as instructional leaders in practice. This speaks to the work of Fink and Resnick (2001), who noted that the average principal's days are "filled with activities of management scheduling, reporting, handling relations with parents and community, dealing with the multiple crises and special situations that are inevitable in schools" (p. 598). I found this to be consistent with the current work of some of the principals within my district. Despite even the best intentions, they spent relatively little time in classrooms and even less time talking directly about instruction with their teachers. Even when time was allocated to teacher planning and professional development, there was still little time left over to provide direct leadership relevant to instructional planning, growth, and direction.

Honig et al. (2010) identified five dimensions of central office transformation in countering the central-office-administration-as-usual model:

- **Dimension 1:** Learning-focused partnerships with school principals to deepen principals' instructional leadership practice,
- **Dimension 2:** Assistance to the central office–principal partnerships,
- **Dimension 3:** Reorganizing and reculturing of each central office unit to support the central office–principal partnerships and teaching and learning improvement,
- **Dimension 4:** Stewardship of the overall central office transformation process, and
- **Dimension 5:** Use of evidence throughout the central office to support continual improvement of work practices and relationships with schools (p. v).

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Utilizing a “robust methodological approach to data collection and analysis of central office practices... Findings highlight the varied people, units, work practices, and other conditions within urban school district central offices that seem to matter to districtwide teaching and learning improvements” (Honig et al., 2010, p. 126).

Childress et al. (2006) implored leaders to understand that “school-based solutions, while important, aren’t enough. If they were, and low-performing schools could heal themselves, urban systems today would be chock-full of highly functioning schools” (p. 55). Achieving excellence on a broad scale, according to the authors, requires a districtwide strategy for improving instruction in the classroom and an organization that can implement it. “Only the district office can create such a plan, identify and spread best practices, develop leadership capabilities at all levels, build information systems to monitor student improvement and hold people accountable for results” (Childress et al., 2006, p. 55). Researchers contend that this requires transformation at the district level. Unless central office leaders see this as a viable, tangible role, efforts for reform will remain stunted by lack of clarity.

Much of the current research has been conducted within the past 15 – 20 years, tends to be descriptive, and is primarily based on case studies (Bergeson & Heuschel, 2004; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004). In response to this and in collaboration with the Research and Evaluation Office at the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, the authors collected and analyzed over 80 research reports and articles on the characteristics of improved school districts (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004). Through their research, they identified 13 common themes, grouping them into the following four categories:

1. **Effective Leadership** – this includes a focus on all students learning, dynamic and distributed leadership, and sustained improvement efforts over time (pp. 1-2),
2. **Quality Teaching and Learning** – this includes high expectations and accountability for adults, coordinated and aligned curriculum and assessment, coordinated and embedded professional development, and quality classroom instruction (pp. 3-4),
3. **Support for Systemwide Improvement** – this includes effective use of data, strategic allocation of resources, and policy and program coherence (pp. 4-5), and
4. **Clear and Collaborative Relationships** – this includes professional culture and collaborative relationships, a clear understanding of school and district roles and responsibilities, and interpreting and managing the external environment (pp. 5-6).

In the continued effort to provide a better understanding of improved school districts and their characteristics and actions, the authors created this model to “shed light on the relationship between school district policy, programs, and practices and the improvement of student learning” (Bergeson & Heuschel, 2004, p. 1).

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 essentially required school district central office leadership in the US to help schools dramatically improve performance while simultaneously reducing longstanding achievement gaps. However, asserts Honig (2013), Central offices have traditionally focused on business and compliance functions rather than on supporting schools in their efforts to help all students realize ambitious learning goals. To address this mismatch between new performance demands and long-standing central office work and capacity, district leaders must set aside old ways of working and fundamentally transform their central offices. (p. 1)

The assertions and findings above are further validated by the Center for Educational Leadership (Silverman, 2016); their *Principal Support Framework* identifies the need for central office leaders to:

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- Provide differentiated and integrated services rooted in an understanding of the needs of each school,
- Design services that can anticipate and proactively meet the needs of the school,
- Build relationships with principals that add value to the work of the principal and school,
- Create a culture of continuous improvement, to learn, adapt and respond to the changing needs of schools, and
- Work efficiently through a well-coordinated and defined set of operational systems. (p. 3)

Supporting principal success is multifaceted and requires collaboration and cooperation across the central office at all levels. This framework seeks to provide leaders with tangible guidance as they progress.

Beyond the Surface: Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging in the Ivory Tower

Despite the growing interest in the diversification of the ivory tower, there remains a sparsity of literature focusing on the representation and experiences of the underrepresented, especially at top leadership levels (e.g., district superintendencies and college deanships). Instead, the research on administrators is primarily limited to the principalship (Ryan et al., 2016) or cloaked in studies on “women” and “minorities” (Agosto & Roland, 2018). Since the journeys of women and minority leaders are not homogeneous, we must consider the distinctive, layered, and intersectional experiences of all leaders. Various perspectives, including critical race theory (see Capper, 2015), feminist theory (see Blackmore, 2013), critical spirituality (see Dantley, 2010), and multiculturalism (see Santamaría & Santamaría, 2013), have been offered to expose the challenges faced by non-white leaders in education. Nonetheless, the theory and research focusing explicitly on the uneven path to leadership for the underrepresented remain underdeveloped.

Yet, what is known, is that due to their unique identities in and outside of the ivory tower, those who are underrepresented in educational leadership regularly encounter hurdles (e.g., racism and sexism) (Brown, 2014, 2018) of various kinds. Unless scholars carefully examine the roots of and contributors to structural barriers, the advancement of “good” policies for equitable educational leadership opportunities will continue to be restricted. Taking stock of the existing theory and research related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging in the Ivory Tower, I discuss the importance of these elements in the leadership space. This chapter, in a nutshell, aims to advance the knowledge on the paths of current and aspiring central office leaders in education and bring to the forefront the need for more refined research and theory development in this arena.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging in “Context”

Despite the progress made in diversifying the demographic profile of educational leadership in the US, males, especially white males, continue to dominate this space (Johnson & Fournillier, 2021; Kellerman et al., 2007; Kulik & Metz, 2015). For this reason, the theory and research historically reflecting this perspective tend to be applied to people of all groups. While inroads continue to be made in capturing the experiences of women and minority leaders in education, research on people in these positions remains notably absent in the literature. Further, what also remains missing from the general body of literature is the consideration of context. Contextual factors, i.e., the intersection of race, gender, leadership, and patriarchal spaces, speak to the multiple, layered, intersectional identities of non-archetypal leaders in

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various US educational settings. Without accounting for context, a proper understanding of gender and racial inequities in education leadership remains elusive. The sections below highlight the literature regarding diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB), all manifested within the US educational leadership sphere. It was argued that by considering the noted contextual dynamics (Hofstede, 2011), we can build knowledge on the necessity of DEIB in the educational leadership sphere, particularly within the ivory tower.

Numerous scholars have called for more studies about leadership identities, individual differences, the impact of identity on these individual differences, and how leaders progress from one identity stage to the next. Understanding the relationship between leadership and identity helps researchers build the knowledge base on individuals' development and future behaviors as leaders (Murphy, 1999). Exploring the contextual and intersecting variables regarding identity is vital to explaining how leaders construct, develop, and execute their own identities (Eubanks et al., 2012; Karp & Helgø, 2009). This exploration is, by extension, fundamental to understanding effective leadership (Lord & Hall, 2003). Indeed, history, economics, and culture cannot be ignored, considering the impact of identity on those who do not embody the 'norms' associated with the dominant culture (Johnson, 2021). Progress begins by understanding that this work involves studies geared towards understanding the intersecting elements at play in the cultivation and success of non-archetypical leaders (Ospina & Foldy, 2009, 2010).

In line with research connecting intersectionality and educational leadership, Parker and Villalpando (2007) encompassed multiple themes – connecting race and racism, the challenge of social justice, dominant ideologies, and experiential knowledge. They collected articles that pinpoint the importance of critical theory analysis to administrative policy and practice in the educational leadership arena. The authors found that though the demographics of the nation's school populations are increasingly comprised of multicultural students, the percentages of principals and district leaders who are non-white (i.e., black, Latino, Asian-American, or other) have barely gained ground. Considering this, Allan (2003) emphasized the need for a 'strategic deployment of discourse,' meaningful conversations around gender and racial inequalities in educational leadership. In this way, stakeholders are reminded that this matter "cannot be ignored when trying to achieve racial equity in the context of increasing federal and state accountability. Democratic leadership for social justice...and action will provide us with some answers to this challenge" (Parker & Villalpando, p. 523).

Mabokela and Madsen (2005) employed intergroup theory "to understand how both African–American and European–American school leaders perceived and negotiated sources of intergroup conflict and how this affected their potential for creating an inclusive school environment" (p. 187). Through this work, the authors examined the responses of white American and black American administrators to intergroup conflict stemming from cultural incongruities in desegregated suburban US schools and school districts. They concluded that (1) diversity and leadership are interconnected; (2) US schools are undergoing pressure to educate a diverse and growing community of students, families, and shareholders; and (3) creating an inclusive school requires educational leaders to vigorously and actively respond – as opposed to simply reacting – to intergroup conflict among an increasingly diverse community/population.

Similarly, in a study of women in leadership and leadership styles, Gipson et al. (2017) added that more must continue to be done to ensure that those in and promoted to educational leadership positions aptly reflect this same commitment to DEIB. Yet, the growth and advancement of non-archetypal leaders into what has characteristically been a male- and white-dominated realm (Kellerman et al., 2007; Kulik & Metz, 2015) are chief components in the work to increase diversity in leadership. This includes

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examining the impact of perceptions and evaluations of persons with multiple stigmatized identities in leadership roles (Richardson & Loubier, 2008; Rosette et al., 2016; Sawyer et al., 2013).

Utilizing a critical democratic framework, Cho et al. (2009) analyzed leaders' perspectives from various educational institutions and districts across North America. Two overarching themes arose from participants' perspectives on the new leader induction program: (1) the importance of the educational leader's role in creating clearer partnerships and collaborations among stakeholders (including faculty, school boards, schools, and communities), and (2) the significant job of the educational leader as effective communicator, upholding the necessity of equity, diversity, inclusion, and understanding within the community. Overwhelmingly, say Cho et al. (2009), in the ongoing work to improve program philosophy, policy, and practice, findings revealed the need for a more critical examination of the process and outcome of mentorship and induction programs designed to improve building and district level leaders' efficiency.

Whang (2018) explored "the phenomenon of perilous politics of school leadership for social justice, in order to strengthen social equity for educational development" (p. 1). Leadership for social justice, according to Whang (2018), "emphasizes that leaders can make efforts to pursue equitable relationships of gender, class, race, culture, etc. Therefore, it stresses the understanding of 'intersectionality' of multiple biases" (p. 1). Balancing intersectionality (i.e., race and gender) with leadership politics requires advocates for justice to be responsive as opposed to operating reactively. As a result, strengthening social equity in the pursuit and development of educational leaders remains an enduring and deliberate effort on the part of the justice-based district leader.

Using control groups, Hogg et al. (2001) conducted an experiment looking at social identity, group dynamics, and leadership. The authors investigated the relationships between group membership and leadership endorsement to connect demographic differences with the notion of the glass ceiling. Findings highlighted that demographic minorities tend to find leadership difficult in groups whose prototypes represent the demographic majority. Hogg and van Knippenberg (2003) further concluded that "followers pay close attention to prototypicality... One consequence is that the leader acquires greater and more secure leadership ability. Another consequence is that the status and prestige differential between leader(s) and followers is entrenched" (p. 21).

Other scholars, including Sawyer et al. (2013), pointed to the extreme importance of "studying and understanding the realities of identity through intersectional research" (p. 80), determining that "studying individual identities is good, but examining intersectionality is better" (p. 80). For underrepresented leaders, furthering this work calls for the development and progression of leadership frameworks that are fair, inclusive, and socially just (Moorosi et al., 2018). This advances the commitment to reframing and unpacking the intersections of gender, race, and class – en route to better understanding and how these elements impact DEIB, particularly in educational leadership. These findings are all significant in that they affect the development and progression of those who are and remain underrepresented at the top levels of educational leadership.

Bringing it all Together: Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging in Educational Leadership

The noted themes (DEIB) have been interconnected in this piece for the following reasons: (1) identity directly impacts one's social reality, which Wing (1997) refers to as the "multiplicative definition of self" (p. 31), and (2) race, ethnicity, and gender are manifested as concurrent realities (Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw & Bonis, 2005; Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Ngwainmbi, 2004). These factors directly

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and systematically impact leadership perceptions, practices, and cultures (Allan, 2003; Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986; Iverson, 2007). Scholars, including Hogg and van Knippenberg (2003), argue that changing the trajectory for those underrepresented in leadership spaces means discussing the impact(s) of the glass ceiling on the realities and identities of those who do not “fit” the longstanding leadership archetype. Ospina and Foldy (2010) contend that “attention to the relational dimensions of leadership represents a new frontier of leadership research and is an expression of the growing scholarly interest in the conditions that foster collective action within and across boundaries” (p. 292).

Examining the multiplicative dimensions of leadership, Ospina and Foldy (2009, 2010) contend that advocacy, bridge-building, and leadership for social change are all relevant factors in reconstructing the scope of the leadership sphere. Day and Antonakis (2012) note that “issues regarding diversity and leadership have been highlighted as receiving relatively scarce attention in the literature... In particular, the diversity of leaders and followers in terms of culture, gender, race and ethnicity, or sexual orientation has been infrequently addressed” (p. 13). For those in and en route to central office leadership, navigating these boundaries includes exploring the historical cultures, antecedents, and leadership contexts from a social change perspective. The recognition of multiple identities and intersecting inequalities is a critical step towards improving relevant equity- and equality-based policy initiatives. Relevant to the educational leadership sphere, it is even more crucial to create and uphold inclusive and accepting cultures for all members of the larger constituency. This is all the more important for those who do not reflect the single-track leadership standard.

An intersectional-type research paradigm, as Dhamoon (2011) notes, “serves to not simply describe and explain complex dynamics of power in specific contexts and at different levels of social life but also critique or deconstruct and therefore disrupt the forces of power so as to offer alternative worldviews” (p. 240). The infusion of intersectionality methods provides stakeholders with the necessary tools to continue disentangling these categories (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2010). Wing (1997, 2003) posits that intersectionality is critical for thinking about how policies, practices, and discourses can be enhanced and transformed. The entrenched policy, legal, and social ramifications justify the need to advance this and other relevant literature. This begins by acknowledging the current disparities that subsist within the realm of leadership. En route to creating new policies promoting equity in leadership, an important step involves identifying that this need exists (Dhamoon, 2011).

Increased emphasis on the social aspects of education and the development of educational leaders has meant more attention dedicated to investigating the relationships between the school and the community (Ayers et al., 1998). Similarly, new attention is also being paid to education’s place as a fundamental characteristic and microcosm of the greater society. In light of this, increasing emphasis is now being placed on preparing leaders capable of understanding and operating from a justice-based perspective. For the social justice leader, equity can be defined in numerous ways and through multiple means. The challenge, then, includes unpacking the many meanings of justice and creating safe spaces for outlaws and advocates alike to explore and make explicit the connections between the many subjective meanings of justice (Bell, 2007; Bogotch, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2013). To better understand the path, progression, successes, and barriers of non-archetypal within the educational leadership sector, we must begin by exploring the intersection of race, gender, and class.

Example-setters are key to increasing diversity and changing the stereotypes in educational leadership in that they serve to construct the identities of emergent leaders in their respective jurisdictions (Adejare, 2018; Kalwies, 1988). Assessing the impact of role models in the construction of professional and leadership identities, Adejare (2018) noted that “same-gender role models may be especially beneficial

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for showcasing ways to overcome gender bias, being an inspiration of success, or changing the gender stereotype of women succeeding in male-dominated fields” (p. 16). Women, for example, continue to provide a substantial pool of potential leaders in education (Prime et al., 2009), the move towards governance that is inclusive and collaborative (Ospina & Foldy, 2010) begins with an introspective look at longstanding systemic inequities and power imbalances across all sectors. This work includes expanding the discussions regarding the role and capacity of underrepresented leaders in educational and organizational settings. Given the importance of contextual factors in the leadership sphere (Liden & Antonakis, 2009), the findings of studies of this nature can help increase the number and diversity of leaders in the ivory tower.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Belonging, and Central Office Leadership

A year ago, Sharon Griffin assumed the leadership of the Shelby County Schools with a pledge to address a problem she had seen fester during her years as a teacher and administrator in the district. The lack of on-the-ground engagement by the “central office” had created a disconnect – both real and perceived – between the schools and district headquarters on Hollywood Street... Griffin’s efforts to bridge that gap was a major theme of her first year, as she adopted a host of measures to help central office become more responsive to needs of schools rather than imposing top-down mandates (Kebede, 2018).

Sharon Griffin, who became the first chief of schools of Shelby County Schools in January 2017, required district leaders to take weekly school tours, held numerous listening sessions as her team constructed the school district’s first academic plan in years, and only purchased resources schools needed, not merely what central office leaders thought might be suitable for schools (Kebede, 2018). In addition, she has overseen sweeping changes in curriculum and professional development to include more responsiveness to what teachers say they need.

This is just one illustration of the sweeping, documented changes underway to revamp the now-antiquated school district central office model. Far too often, district-led initiatives to lead school improvement efforts tend to stem from necessity (i.e., instances where the state has limited capacity to govern). In these instances, district administrators’ work was found to be rooted in the connection between (and the essentiality of) effective leadership to drive and support school improvement endeavors. In addition to Shelby County, Memphis, Atlanta, and Fort Wayne are highlighted in this piece for their work in actively pursuing leadership improvement *before* their states became involved. In these instances, the state played a limited supportive role and did not hinder central office efforts to lead (Augustine et al., 2009). I reference these locations, as occurrences of this nature need to be emphasized more frequently in the ongoing work to be more responsive to what schools and school districts need. Reports of this nature build morale, and most importantly, they allow all constituency members to see that success is possible. Success is attainable.

Much of the extant literature speaks to the need for restructuring, transformation, and improvement of the central office. Others highlight the budgetary aspects involved in district-level leadership (i.e., district-level over/spending). Lee (2017), for example, in her extensive study of the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) as part of the #OUSDBudget series, determined that the “‘shift’ to reduce central office expenditures over the last few years have been achieved mostly through accounting decisions, rather than substantive changes in budgetary control to move dollars closer to students” (p. 4). As an example, compared to other districts in the United States of America, the entire state of California ranks

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in the bottom 20% of per-pupil spending, despite being wealthier than all but a handful of countries (Lee, 2017) – *yes, countries* – in the world. While a bit disconcerting, this revelation was, thankfully, offset by celebratory articles – e.g., Administrator awards, Leadership summits, and the district revamping noted above in Memphis, TN, Atlanta, GA, and Fort Wayne, IN.

Educational leaders commonly agree that to serve in their optimal capacities, district offices require transformation. This involves collaboration with “business leaders, who care about their communities and know that their companies need well-educated workers in order to be competitive, [and] have a big stake in assisting with this transformation” (Childress et al., 2006, p. 56). For too long, assert the authors, external constituents have been extremely generous with money and counsel for their adjoining districts, “only to be frustrated by the results. As some corporate executives are beginning to realize, urban school systems are vastly more complex than businesses, yet the knowledge about how to manage them is amazingly sparse” (Childress et al., 2006, p. 56).

There is no question regarding the many daily responsibilities of central office administrators. This matter is further compounded, states Honig (2008), by those who “suggest that these demands mean that central offices, especially in midsized and large districts, should become learning organizations but provide few guides for how central offices might operate as learning organizations” (p. 627). Therefore, it is imperative – even if it means revisiting central office leaders’ goals, standards, mission, and vision – for district leaders to support principals in their work (Honig & Rainey, 2014; Marshall, 2005).

The role of central office leaders includes taking the necessary time – beyond their responsibilities as administrators and evaluators – to support, build, and develop principals as instructional leaders. It is hard to counter the notion that schools – and school systems, principally – must be led with a clear and articulable instructional vision. Research supports the immense potential for principal learning and development to occur in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), provided that central office leaders serve as facilitators and supporters, rather than from an evaluative or directive stance (Fink & Resnick, 2001; Hubbard et al., 2006).

Central office leaders must recommit to physically and palpably assisting principals in incorporating tangible, instructional leadership strategies into their respective practices. If supporting the work of school building leaders is deemed essential, then there must be more clarity in defining the terms of the charge: allocating the necessary time to promote and establish those with the authority, ability, and capability to execute this vision (Augustine et al., 2009; Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012). Incorporating Instructional Leadership Directors (ILDs) is a significant step – and an equally valuable resource – in bridging the facilitative-evaluative, support-directive, school district-school building leadership gaps.

Moving the Research Forward

To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes so that through transforming action, they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity. (Freire, 1972, p. 4)

Recognizing that no one unified theory of leadership currently exists, leadership theory commonly emphasizes many outcomes, from how leaders are perceived, to how leaders directly impact performance, to the specific actions of group members (Day & Antonakis, 2012). For those in and aspiring towards formal positions of headship, “leadership theory has been applied to levels that include events, individuals, dyads, groups, organizations, and political systems; it has focused on immediate and delayed effects;

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and it often incorporates contextual differences” (Dinh et al., 2014, pp. 55-56). Thus, it is not surprising that leadership encompasses over 60 different theoretical domains and a wide variety of methodological approaches (Dinh et al., 2014).

From a moral standpoint, state Brown and Treviño (2006), academic researchers have been granted a prime opportunity to conduct and execute research that can improve leadership cultures, climates, performance, and ethics. On a more pragmatic note, “leadership scholars have always been involved in research that aims to contribute to effective leadership. Because ethical leadership and effective leadership are related, the topic of ethical leadership should appeal to scholars with diverse motivations and interests” (Brown & Treviño, 2006, p. 613). This discourse is especially relevant in education, considering the incongruence between many employees’ heightened levels of education (Davidson & Burke, 2000; Eagly & Carli, 2007) compared to their current status in leadership spaces (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

Again, of great significance to this paper is the assertion that in education, this includes the increased qualifications of those who are underrepresented to serve in senior-level leadership capacities (Gupton, 2009; Hill et al., 2016; Prime et al., 2009). For women and members of minoritized groups, this includes addressing their layered and intersectional pathways to leadership in education. Rhode (2017) reminds relevant stakeholders that generational inequality, unconscious bias, in-group favoritism, and inhospitable cultures, to name a few, remain obstacles within many leadership spheres. Given Rhode’s (2014, 2017) position that confronting these factors is key to addressing the extant educational leadership gaps, this piece focuses on the tenets embedded within equitable leadership (i.e., identity, equity, and intersectionality) in the continued effort to move this work forward.

SUGGESTIONS FOR ADDITIONAL RESEARCH

The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a school district is the school superintendent. The superintendent is essentially the face of the district. They are most responsible for the successes of a district and most assuredly responsible when there are failures. The role of a school superintendent is broad. It can be rewarding, but the decisions they make can also be especially difficult and taxing. It takes an exceptional person with a unique skill set to be an effective school superintendent (Meador, 2017).

According to Honig (2013), practical transformation efforts should involve “creating partnerships between principals and executive-level central office staff, developing and aligning performance-oriented central office services to support districtwide instructional improvement, and establishing superintendent and other central office leadership that will help staff build their capacity for better performance” (p. 1). The purpose of beginning this section with a blurb defining the institution of the school district as a governing body immediately followed by Honig’s call for change is this – the mismatch between the school district as a governing body versus the call for central office as leaders of school support – remains prevalent, both on the books and in action. Is it possible for the district to effectively manage the whole spectra of all of these responsibilities, or is it time to completely transform the institution as we currently know it?

The effort to connect and elucidate central office administrators’ participation in teaching and learning improvement is interminable. A challenge for regional leaders remains the ‘unprecedented demands’ faced by administrators to tangibly and consistently support districtwide efforts to improve teaching and learning. In response to this challenge, it is necessary to irradiate the factors behind the widespread

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problem of disconnected visions and work practices at the district and school levels. In the process, these systems must converge for the sake of systemwide legitimacy. Leaders must consider the extent to which they are modeling to the constituency that work and learning practices are suitable and valid, even if they cannot yet be directly connected to student performance (Honig, 2008).

Theoretically, the notion of principal professional learning committees is encouraging. Principals are charged with supporting and pouring into their staff members because we generally agree that happier teachers equate to more successful students. Yet, whose responsibility is it to develop, support, and pour into our school building leaders? As with all managers, central office administrators already have more than enough to ‘do.’ Still, it is imperative – even if it means revisiting the goals/standards/mission/vision of the central office and its leadership – for district leaders to support principals in their work. There is boundless potential for principal learning and development to occur in PLCs, provided that central office leaders serve as facilitators and supporters, rather than from an evaluative or directive stance (Hubbard et al., 2006).

Though there is a plethora of literature documenting the role of, the responsibility of, and best practices for school leaders, I found it more challenging to locate empirical works relevant to the direct function of the central office in spearheading educational excellence. It is important to note that research in this realm is still growing, and extant literature is promising. Honig and Rainey (2014) state that “future research should aim to further understanding of principal learning in PLCs and how central office and other leaders can productively facilitate the process” (p. 2). I, similarly, look forward to producing this and other research relevant to the advancement of the central office leadership sphere in this capacity.

CONCLUSION

Each district is an independent special-purpose government, or dependent school systems, under the guidelines of each US state government and local school boards. A school district is a legally separate body, corporate and politic. School districts are local governments with powers similar to that of a town or a county, including taxation and eminent domain, except in Virginia, whose school divisions have no taxing authority and must depend on another local government (county, city, or town) for funding (Strizek, 2006).

The number of documented studies in this realm is growing; still, relatively little is known about the inner workings of the school district central office. What we do know, in increasing fashion, is that there is a need for a better and more direct relationship to be forged between SDLs (school district leaders) and SBLs (school building leaders). Silverman (2016) calls out three areas of action for central office leaders to support principals:

- **Clarity** on their role and what is expected of them on a day-to-day basis.
- **Professional development** that is personalized, differentiated, and typically self-initiated.
- **Strategic relationships** with central office staff that make it easy for them to access and use district resources based on school need. (p. 2)

The role of the superintendent in actively forging these partnerships is vital, given that “much of what a superintendent does involves working directly with others. School superintendents must be effective

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leaders who work well with other people and understand the value of building relationships” (Meador, 2017, p. 1). Additionally, asserts Meador (2017),

A superintendent must be adept at establishing working relationships with many interest groups inside the school and within the community itself to maximize their effectiveness. Building a strong rapport with the constituents in the district makes fulfilling the required roles of a school superintendent a little easier. (p. 1)

In recent years, more and more educators “have suggested that it’s time for the managers of principals – superintendents and assistant superintendents – to begin allocating their time differently. In particular, the call for a principal manager’s role to shift from operations to instruction has gained momentum” (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012, p. 70). While there is consensus that school systems need leaders with clear and articulable visions, there remains less clarity in defining the terms of the charge: allocating the necessary time to cultivating those who are mission-minded and capable of executing a real, palpable vision.

Albeit challenging, it is essential, for as Bambrick-Santoyo (2012) reminds those tasked with the responsibility of managing schools, the key to achieving desired results is to “re-envision the way we manage leaders” (p. 70). Granted, the idea of transforming the role of the district-level leader is a daring one, given that it entails a complete restructuring of the very core of the existing structure. Hence, this shift, one that allows district leaders to take charge of instruction, can begin with a commitment to initiating the following two steps:

1. Delegating operational work to others, and
2. Providing expert coaching to school leaders (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012, p. 70).

Appointing a leader/leadership team to manage school operations will create opportunities for building administrators to focus on improving the quality of instruction. In resounding and increasing fashion, conclusions reveal the ongoing call for central office district leaders to employ/practice leadership that: (1) is palpably efficacious, (2) supports quality teaching and learning environments, (3) supports – and provides strategies for – systemwide improvement, and (4) actively creates and promotes transparent and collaborative relationships – this includes professional culture and collaborative relationships, clear understanding of school and district roles and responsibilities, and interpreting and managing the external environment (pp. 5-6).

This chapter reveals that the tangible elements of justice-based leadership perspectives remain understudied in this arena (Berkovich, 2014; Lambert, 2002, 2003). Taken together, scholarship in this area illustrates the importance of considering all perspectives regarding matters of equity in leadership. According to Bogotch (2000), social justice “requires an ongoing struggle [i.e., to share power, knowledge, and resources equitably] and cannot be separated from how educational theories and practices are being [re]defined and practiced by professionals within schools, academic disciplines, and governmental circles” (p. 140). Pertinent to the ivory tower, there can be no one dominant design, program, or worldview that excludes other perspectives and approaches (Belden, 2017; Pratt-Clarke & Maes, 2010, 2017). This connection between theory and practice, particularly as they relate to morality and the use of power, reveals why social justice is relevant, as an educational intervention, in every era (Dean et al., 2009; Hodges & Welch, 2018).

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Persistent theoretical, systemic, and methodological limitations continue to limit the ability of researchers, educational leaders, and other relevant stakeholders to use extant findings to inform policy in this regard. To this point, I seek to advance the existing DEIB literature as a transformative next step in the evolution of this and other related educational leadership scholarship (Johnson & Fournillier, 2021; Yukl, 2009). Stakeholders who wish to continue influencing equity- and justice-based policy initiatives within the ivory tower must highlight and promote the necessity of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging in educational leadership. Akin to ‘trickle-down economics,’ this work must begin at the top, at the Central Office level.

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