The Dynamics of Educational Leadership Roles for Asian-American Women as Contrasted to Their Global Counterparts

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Abstract

Research efforts within the United States focusing on educational leadership have largely excluded the perspectives of women and minorities. As American school-age populations become increasingly diverse, the need for educational leaders from diverse backgrounds also increases. However, the research data show that females and ethnic minorities are under-represented in American educational leadership positions. This paper briefly examines global educational leadership studies which focused on gender and Asian educational leaders. The dynamics of Asian-American student populations and Asian-American educators were examined and the findings from two studies were used to identify how the roles of Asian-American women differed from their global counterparts with respect to achieving the goal of an educational leadership position. The findings from two studies were presented to show how generational issues shaped societal perceptions of the American educational enterprise and how Asian-American females are able to overcome their proportionally under-representation in educational leadership roles.

Keywords: Female Leadership, Global Leadership

Introduction

Globally, administrative jobs in education have one shared characteristic and that is that they are extremely complex irrespective of the nation or culture in which they are found (Brzozowski, 2004) reported finding that once school administrators from Africa, Asia, Europe, South America and the United States were able to strip away language barriers that separated them, they found that they struggled with similar issues; finances, parents, student discipline, high expectations and, where applicable, unions. A commonly voiced concern was the lack of time to handle mounting responsibilities and a loss of latitude for making decisions and being creative (Brzozowski, 2004). An interesting observation was that while school administrators in the United States tended to believe that they still had more site-based latitude to make decisions than did their counterparts in much of the world, in reality they too were moving toward an educational enterprise that was increasingly becoming top-down in nature.

While Brzozowski did not report on gender issues, Houston (2003) and Muller (2007) suggested that women educational administrators, especially Asian women, were not subjected to the same degree of gender-bias issues as their American counterparts. Houston (2003) writing of his experience as the Executive Director of the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) visiting in Vietnam noted that the Vietnamese social system seemed to be built upon reciprocity and trust, and exhibited a sense of peacefulness that appeared to be missing in more developed countries. Educators, and educational administrators tended to be held in high esteem in the culture and gender-bias did not appear to be an issue. Reporting on the role that formal education played within "revolutionary"

settings, Muller (2007) suggested that it enabled women to aspire to and achieve goals that were not even imagined in pre-revolution settings. The argument was made that while gender was not totally eliminated as a discriminatory marker, formal education fostered social cohesion and created room for personal emancipation in the three revolutionary societies examined: Vietnam (since 1976), Nicaragua (1979-1990), and Eritrea (since 1991).

The Dynamics of Educational Leadership Roles for Current Asian-American Women

Asian student enrollment in the United States has doubled every decade since 1970 but during this period the disparity between the proportions of Asian-American teachers in K-12 schools and Asian-American student enrollments has increased (Rong & Preissle, 1997). It is not just that a lower percentage of Asian-Americans are entering the teaching profession, even fewer Asian-American women are moving into educational leadership roles. The research on educational leadership in the American educational enterprise has largely excluded the voices of females and minorities (Benham, & Cooper, 1998). For years, this lack of research was not considered problematic; the over-arching belief being that race and gender were inconsequential (Bass, 1981).

The United States continues to grow more ethnically diverse and as the nation enters into the 21st century, this ethnic diversity has prompted concerns about how to reach and teach ethnically diverse student populations in U.S. schools. Cox (1994) implied that female and minority principals may play an important role in accomplishing schools' goals and this opinion was also voiced by the National Association of Elementary School Principals in their 2000 report. Despite this, few minority women are in school leadership positions, and fewer still are ethnic women exploring issues of leadership diversity (Matthews, 1986). This is particularly true for Asian-American females. Since the Asian-American population in the United States has become one of the fastest growing minority groups, the need to increase Asian-American representation, particularly female representation, in leadership roles in the American educational enterprise, has grown (U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration, 2000) but, research data shows that females and ethnic minorities continue to be under-represented in educational leadership positions. The lack of female and minority principals is seen by many as significant to the American educational enterprise since current students—in 2000, 39 % of public school students were as identified as being from a minority group—are far more ethnically and racially diverse than students of prior generations (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2000). Additionally, there exists a growing shortage of school principals at all levels of K-12 public education system (Education Research Service, 1998). It is estimated that by 2012 the number of K-12 minority students may reach as high as 60% according to a study conducted by the NAESP (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2000).

Two recent studies perhaps best describe the current dynamics of educational leadership roles for Asian-American women in the United States. In attempting to identify significant changes occurring in the American K-12 educational enterprise, Strauss (2005) advanced the idea that the changes occurred as the result of American society experiencing a series of transitions of one generation to another over the last one-hundred years. Strauss (2005) identified five generations since 1901 that were responsible for the significant changes noted in the American K-12 educational enterprise: (a) G.I. Generation born 1901-1924; (b) Silent Generation born 1925-1942; (c) Boomer Generation born 1943-1960; (d) Generation X born 1961-1981; and (e) Millennial Generation born since 1982. The last four generations were said to be central to defining and understanding the changes (Strauss, 2005).

The members of the Silent Generation are described as having moved through K-12 education as students during the 1930s and 1940s, and then became teachers from the 1950s and moved into school administration until nearly all recently retired. During their tenure, they established a period of educational experimentation in the 1970s and 1980s and remained influential in higher education through the 1990s. Members of the Silent Generation are still important in today's society as taxpayers, voters, and trustees and senior faculty at many American institutions of higher education. As Strauss (2005) noted, they remain among the wealthiest Americans and are characterized as being the most critical of current teachers and students. In contrast, members of the Boomer Generation are said to have passed through the American educational system as students during a time when there was a sense in American society of strong community and civic confidence. During this period, the teaching profession had high prestige and was dominated by the women from the much earlier G.I. Generation who, in spite of being well-educated, commonly experienced the "glass ceiling" of gender-bias.

The first members of the Boomer Generation entered college in the 1960s when university life dramatically changed from a climate of stability to one of protests and riots, but in retrospect they acknowledge that they benefited from a good K-12 education and that their university experience gave rise to a sense of having a common perspective of American society (Strauss, 2005). Teaching at the K-12 level remained a high-prestige occupation but Boomer Generation women tended to be less likely to enter the teaching profession than the prior two generations. While being less likely to enter the teaching profession, Boomer Generation women dominated the public school parent organizations and ushered in an era of parental activism not seen before in the American educational enterprise. Since they viewed college as an essential, not mere desirable, destination for their children they pushed for a restructuring of academic programs to better prepare students for higher education. A high school education was not viewed as a terminal educational level as it had been by earlier generations; rather, it was being redefined as preparation for the rigors of higher education academic standards. Those members of the Boomer Generation that did enter the K-12 teaching profession now began to impose zero-tolerance standards, greater homework loads, and a wider array of tests for their students than they had experienced during their own K-12 education. Somewhat surprisingly, Strauss (2005) then states that Generation X students were raised in an era in which the needs of children were considered to be subordinate to their own parents' self-needs. Generation X students are the children of the same late Silent and early Boom Generation parents who pushed for the restructuring of the K-12 system to better meet student higher education preparation needs.

During the 1960s, and through the early 1980s, Strauss (2005) notes that many aspects of American life became less protective of small children and that in some quarters Generation X students were often depicted as being mean, hard-edged, and self-centered. A wave of young males entered the ranks of K-12 teachers during this period, many according to Strauss (2005) for the purpose of avoiding the Vietnam-era draft, and they brought with them social crusades that they introduced in their classrooms. The period of the 1970s saw a sharp drop in the median age of K-12 teachers and the profession lost much of its perceived prestige due in large part to lower pay rates for the newer, less experienced teachers; pay rates that were further impacted by surging inflation. American society has never easily or quickly embraced major changes in institutions such as the K-12 educational enterprise and their perception of the K-12 educational enterprise was further negatively impacted by the introduction of open classrooms, the "new" math with its anti-basics theme, self-esteem and experimental learning movements, and the concept that children learned best when left alone with learning tools. During this period, homework assignments and the time that students spent on completing it dropped to a level less than half of what it had been during the early 1960s.

Societal concerns about the K-12 educational enterprise peaked during the 1980s and resulted in what Strauss (2005) describes as "the great K-12" pullback; experimental learning was discarded in favor of the idea that there was an essential body of knowledge that the Generation X students were not being taught. The U.S. Department of Education in 1983 released its "A Nation at Risk" report that claimed a "rising tide of mediocrity" in the American public schools. During the period that Generation X students were completing high school and entering higher education programs, they heard that the K-12 schools they attended were failures, their teachers were largely incapable of meeting teaching standards, and that they themselves did not meet the achievement standards of their Silent and Boom counterparts. Consequently, when Generation X students graduated from college, fewer of them entered the teaching profession and they developed the perception that those who did were not among the brightest and most qualified members of their generation. Generation X parents are less generous when assessing their own K-12 education than were members of the Boomer Generation and they represent the current parental groups which tend to be skeptical of the efficacy of the current K-12 public school system that is educating their Millennial Generation children (Strauss, 2005).

In the United States, in the course of four generations, societal perceptions of teachers and administrators in the K-12 educational enterprise has shifted from being professional, competent, and highly-prestigious, to the current sense that our teachers and administrators somehow are just not quite capable of doing the job of educating the current generation of students. While perhaps the perception is faulty and ill-informed, the perception is that the brightest and best do not seek to enter the K-12 educational enterprise because it lacks prestige and pays less than other available professional fields. This perception was found to be one of the barriers currently faced by Asian American females in educational leadership roles in K-12 public schools in a study reported by Pacis (2004).

The majority of the Asian-American female educational leaders in the Pacis (2004) study were native born Americans and the rest were either born in Ecuador, Japan, the Philippines or Vietnam; all participated in a Delphi

method study. The Delphi method is a technique used to arrive at a group position regarding an issue under investigation and consists of a series of repeated questionings, usually by means of questionnaires, of a group of individuals whose opinions or judgments are of interest. After the initial questioning of each individual, each subsequent questioning is accompanied by information regarding the preceding round of replies presented anonymously. Each participant is thus encouraged to reconsider and, if appropriate, to change their previous reply in light of the replies of other members of the group. After two or three rounds, the group position is determined by averaging (Linstone, & Turoff, 1975). The questions posed in the Pacis (2004) study included: (1) Why do Asian-American women continue to be under-represented in the ranks of educational leadership?; (2) What are enablers and barriers to Asian-American women working towards a leadership role in?; (3) How do Asian-American women currently in the ranks of educational leadership overcome roadblocks to ultimately become successful school leaders?; (4) How does looking through multiple cultural lenses impact leadership style?; and (5) How can policy makers, school districts and universities improve current recruiting efforts, training and support to increase the number of Asian American females who choose to enter the ranks of educational leadership?

Pacis (2004) reported that the major reasons cited by Asian-American female educational leaders for their under-representation in leadership roles essentially centered on gender and perceived status issues: (a) Asian culture discouraged leadership roles in general for Asian females since educational leadership was seen as male dominated with no place for females; and, (b) Education is not a career path that is encouraged in Asian families since a career in education is not viewed in Asian culture as being highly prestigious. It was reported that the Asian-American female participants in the Pacis (2004) study identified a lack of role models, the stereo-types present within the Asian-American culture concerning the American educational enterprise, English language acquisition, and professional and personal life pressures as significant barriers toward their achievement of a leadership role. Salient enablers however were the leadership training and skills they received during their higher education, an ability to assimilate into the dominant culture, and recruitment practices directed toward minority women candidates. It was interesting to note that two additional prominent enablers were the stereo-type that the dominant culture had of Asians as a "model" highly motivated and intelligent minority, and a tight-knit community in which "Asians helped other Asians".

With respect to the roadblocks that they had to overcome to ultimately become successful school leaders, Pacis (2004) reported that Asian-American female educational leaders identified a combination of cultural and personal impediments. Cultural roadblocks included the necessity of overcoming racial and gender-based stereotypes, a lack of sufficient mentors and support in their community for their chosen profession, and the need to develop an understanding of the learning styles of students from other cultures learn. Personally centered roadblocks included a self-perceived need to overcome their cultural tendencies to avoid confrontation and directed interpersonal interactions, and being comfortable with the fact that money would not determine their success but that the success of their students would. When queried about how looking through multiple cultural lenses impacted their leadership style, the Asian-American females responded that they believed that their own cultural background played an important role in their perceptions as educational leaders and led to their strongly held commitment to understand, and work with, diverse cultures. They also reported that their experiences growing up in a minority culture influenced how they responded to situations and people they encountered in their everyday lives. Their ability to scrutinize the world through multiple lenses provided them a foundation from which to better understand and honor diverse cultures.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Education plays a vital and important role in Asian culture and yet is not a career choice actively promoted within Asian-American families as it is in Asian cultures outside of the United States. Asian children in general are encouraged to seek positions in more lucrative areas such as medicine, engineering and computer science. For Asian American females with the desire to enter education and progress up the ranks to educational leadership, role models and mentors are rare, and yet play important roles in supporting Asian American females who successfully navigate the journey to educational leadership positions. The roadblocks on this journey are numerous, from stereotypes which many perceive as weaknesses in leadership, to the cultural expectations of Asian-American women and family that conflict with the demands of leadership to name a few. Universities and school districts are becoming increasingly aware of the lack of diversity in educational leadership and are making efforts to increase recruitment, but progress is slow. To overcome these road blocks, Asian-American women currently in educational

leadership positions have had to develop a strong work ethic and learn how to successfully merge their own cultural beliefs and values with those of the dominant culture. They also have to develop a strong sense of self-efficacy and understand that they must be life-long learners. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, in order to achieve their goal of becoming successful educational leaders Asian-American females must develop and maintain strong personal and professional support networks and then further use those networks to identify and mentor other aspiring Asian-American female educational leaders.

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