Know Your Water

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PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA
Creating a Culture, Ensuring School Safety, Engaging Communities, Closing the Gap

"Fish swim their entire lives in water yet are unaware water even exists."

That's one of the revelations Dr. Caprice Hollins, CEO of Cultures Connecting LLC, brought forth for many people in a recent keynote address to the AWSP Mastering Principal Leadership Network.

This statement illustrates and clarifies a vital, yet often overlooked and under-prioritized, element of growth-minded, highly-impactful leadership…I'm talking about the make-a-difference-in-the-world, lifesaving, legacy-leaving leadership we all strive to exemplify. Dr. Hollins understands an ever-increasing awareness of the water (culture) in which we swim is foundational to being an effective leader. Understanding how culture shapes perceptions, thinking, ideas and behavior is essential for effective leadership. Outstanding leaders increase their awareness of the water in which they swim and humble themselves to its profound impact on their capacity to lead.

Culture is a broad concept wrapped around an aggregate of various terms such as: equity, norms, beliefs, attitudes, ideals, ethics, laws, language, symbols and traditions. It is a fluid and vital part of our lives, influenced by those with passion and energy. The web of significance in which we are all suspended[1], culture is ubiquitous and often taken for granted as how we do things around here. Justice, identity, morality and freedom: concepts such as these are at once abstract and utterly close to home. Our understanding of them helps define who we are and who we hope to be; we are made by what we make of them[2].

Culture, like water shaping a bedrock, forms our foundation as a society and configures our individual landscape of thought and behavior. The various elements of culture flow in deterministic, nonlinear ways and unpredictably contour the space we occupy. Competent leaders center themselves into an ever-deepening awareness of the cultural water in which they swim, finding comfort in the chaos. More importantly, culturally competent leaders explore how their water is perceived by and impacts others. This brings self-awareness, poise, insight, and empathy into the circumstances of other people's lives, a connection to a great range of people, and the social competence to get things done[3].

Culturally competent leaders are critically conscious of the water in which they swim and understand it has a profound subconscious impact on their attitudes, biases and, therefore, on all decisions they make. To become critically conscious requires an examination of how biases influence our decision-making. Ongoing dedication to deep self-reflection is required practice for closing opportunity gaps at the source. Critical consciousness is prerequisite for understanding our biases, an essential component for truly impactful leadership, and it's within anyone's grasp if they prioritize their growth-goals accordingly. It is a foundational leadership habit-of-mind necessary for closing the chasms between our ideals and behaviors that result in opportunity gaps for students.

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Effective leaders close these chasms by learning from a variety of divergent, unfamiliar and underrepresented knowledge sources and perspectives. They purposely and continuously study how culture influences their thinking and how unconscious bias shapes their thoughts. Culturally competent leaders search for their own blind spots and spend time reflecting upon and critiquing the water in which they swim. They recognize closing opportunity gaps at the foundational level requires examination, critique and challenging the cultural biases driving collective

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behaviors. Above all, the most competent leaders draw sustained attention to the dominant aspects of our culture that result in the marginalization and minoritization of the students we serve.

As leaders, it is imperative to our community, school and students we understand and counteract the aspects of our nation's culture resulting in dominance. To do this, we must be able to clearly see the water in which we swim and, as critically conscious leaders, response to facets of our culture that bestow unearned advantage or privilege predicated on dominance. Specifically, critically conscious, gap-closing leaders call out and deactivate the aspects of our culture negatively impacting our historically underserved groups of children. Those who can do that are "transformative" and focus on broadly conceptualized social justice, as well as intellectual achievement[4].

Transformative leaders continually model how to dig deep and examine problematic bias, thoughts and behaviors. They create conditions and uphold expectations for all staff to identify, name and change socially constructed fear and suspicion. They maintain and model the expectation that trusting, caring and supportive personal relationships will be part of every child's experience. With passion and persistence, transformative leaders illuminate and neutralize the language, behaviors and the systems causing disproportionate outcomes,

like the fact boys are suspended from school at twice the rate of girls.

Clearly, boys are not inherently maladapted or psychologically ill equipped for school compared to girls. Transformative leaders realize this and provide the support, diverse knowledge sources, time, resources and accountability necessary to cause change in the prevailing culture and systems. Gap-closing leaders model and teach all staff to continually evaluate their biases and behavior in order to measurably improve the outcomes for boys.

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With the same mindful, introspective, cultural critique, transformative leaders demonstrate how and require staff to critically examine the cultural waters contributing to the following statistics:

- Schools suspend students of color at three times the rate of white students.

- Suspensions are issued to African-American girls at higher rates than any other race or ethnicity.

- 40% of students being expelled from U.S. schools each year are African-American.

- Schools graduate African-American and Latino students at half the rate of white students.

- Schools suspend students with disabilities (regardless of race or sex) at higher rates than students without disabilities.

- Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual students are more than twice as likely as gender-normative and heteronormative students to have missed school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable (36.6% vs. 14.7%).

Transformative leaders turn schools into places of liberation, equity for all students, and sites for academic and intellectual growth. Critically conscious, culturally competent leaders intentionally deconstruct negative ideas and images about groups of students and do not allow them to be seen as problems, as unmotivated, as uncaring… as "others." They do not allow "difference to be equated with deficit." Gap-closing leaders understand the *single most important factor in the academic achievement of minoritized students is the principal's explicit rejection of deficit thinking*.[5]

Gap-closing leaders create, expect and lead a hopeful school culture where students' mental and motivational