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PATRICIA L. GUERRA

B. GENISE HENRY

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A CONNECTION BETWEEN MORAL IMPERATIVE AND WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP?

SARAH W. NELSON
PATRICIA L. GUERRA
B. GENISE HENRY

Texas State University—San Marcos

This paper describes a qualitative study of two school districts' efforts to support school leaders in developing the knowledge and skills to analyze, understand, and transform system inequities. The results suggest that, despite being armed with knowledge and skills, leaders may be reluctant to act even when doing so is within the scope of their authority. This work draws from Fullan's (2003) concept of moral imperative and examines the connection between moral imperative and women's ways of leading. The findings have implications for educational leadership programs that seek to prepare school leaders capable of challenging and changing inequitable systems.

Keywords: leadership, moral imperative, school reform, equity, women's leadership

School reform has been on the minds of U.S. educators at least since the latter part of the 19th century (Keefe & Amenta, 2005). However, it was not until the 1950s that reform became a mainstay of public schools (Eisner, 1992). The launch of Sputnik in 1957 resulted in a call to improve science and math education. The late 1970s brought the Effective Schools Movement (Edmonds, 1979), with a focus on improving entire schools. The release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 intensified school improvement efforts, and entire school systems became the target of reform strategies. While there is some evidence to suggest that all of this reforming has improved some individual districts, at least in the short term (Cuban, 2007), no reform strategy has a record of substantial and sustained improvement, especially for culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students (Berman, Chambliss, & Geiser, 1999; Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center 2006a, 2006b).

There have been numerous arguments made as to why reform efforts have largely failed (e.g., Fennimore, 2005; García & Guerra, 2004; Hess & Kelly, 2007; Valencia, Valenzuela, Sloan, & Foley, 2001). Recently, scholars have begun to question how much educators alone can actually affect the achievement, since societal conditions have been shown to play such a significant role in the achievement gap (e.g., Dantley & Tillman, 2006; Rothstein, 2005). Nonetheless, no one is arguing that what happens in schools does not matter. To the contrary, scholars agree that what educators, particularly school leaders, do or do not do makes a tremendous difference in whether and which students achieve. Moreover, even those who maintain that schools have limited control over reducing the gap agree that schools have come nowhere near the point of reducing the gap as much as is within their purview (Rothstein, 2005).

Fullan (2003) asserts that one of the most important reasons schools have not significantly reduced the achievement gap is that too few educational leaders work with a moral imperative. Many tinker with improvements in areas that might make individual circumstances better or enhance an aspect of the system that is of little significance, but few work in a way that will make a lasting difference. This, he maintains, is wrong-headed:

The only goal worth talking about is transforming the current system so that large-scale, sustainable, continuous reform becomes built in. Moral purpose of the highest order is having a system where all students learn, the gap between high and low performance becomes greatly reduced, and what people learn enables them to be successful citizens and workers in a morally based knowledge society. (p. 29)

Fullan argues that too much of school leadership unfortunately does not have anything to do with moral purposes. He includes managing resources, engaging in public relations, and raising test scores in this category. Moreover, he maintains that while many school leaders talk about vision related to a moral purpose, almost none take

sufficient action in the face of resistance to make that vision a reality. That is, many educational leaders talk about wanting to create schools that serve all students well, but few are willing to do what is necessary to achieve that vision because it means challenging and changing current practice. Fullan contends that “conflict avoidance in the face of poor performance is an act of moral neglect” (p. 32).

Fullan’s argument poses a challenge for those of us who work in educational leadership programs. If, as Fullan suggests, school leaders are not working with the moral imperative necessary to significantly reduce the achievement gap, what does this then mean for those of us who prepare principals and superintendents? What must we do differently in our programs to help school leaders develop the willingness to sufficiently disrupt the system that is perpetuating the current inequities? Moreover, what must we do if we want teachers, principals, and superintendents who are not only school leaders, but also community leaders?

This paper reports on the findings from a two-year qualitative study of two school districts’ efforts to close the achievement gap through a professional development program in diversity. The aim of this program was to support school leaders (teacher-leaders as well as administrators) in developing the knowledge and skills to not only analyze and understand system inequities, but also to begin to change them. The results suggest that despite being armed with knowledge and skills, leaders may be reluctant to act even when doing so is within the scope of their authority. The findings have important implications for those of us who work in educational leadership programs that seek to prepare principals capable of challenging and changing inequitable systems.

WHY A MORAL IMPERATIVE MATTERS

Ensuring a more equitable educational system requires leaders who are willing to engage in practices that challenge current structures that limit student potential; yet, traditional strategies in school reform efforts have not produced the kind of school leaders who are pivotal to system change (Fullan, 2003). Fullan argues that what has been missing from the practice of too many school leaders is a moral imperative. He asserts that acting with moral imperative is essential to transcending current practices in school leadership.

In writing about the phenomenon of leaders acting with a moral imperative, Fullan (2003) focuses on leadership as a collective enterprise. He describes in detail how leaders in schools working under the auspice of moral purpose create systems in which students can learn, gaps can be reduced, and students can become successful citizens. He further asserts that “the quality of the public education system relates directly to the quality of life that people enjoy” (p. 3). This being the case, much is at stake where power is held and negotiated in the public school system. Leadership is at the forefront of this negotiation. Charting leadership across levels, Fullan contests that leaders must pave the way for new leaders. He states that “...what you leave behind at the end of your tenure is not so much bottom-line results but rather leaders, at many levels, who can carry on and perhaps do even better than you did” (p. 10).

Having identified barriers to school leadership, Fullan (2003) also found that seemingly advanced efforts that brought about large-scale improvement did so only in the short term. Such efforts only scratched the surface of what it takes to promote sustained environments for ongoing systemic change. For example, Fullan found that when low educator morale accompanied improvement efforts, the change tended to be superficial and not lasting. Fullan submits that lasting change occurs only when leaders move from an individual focus to that of a societal focus, thus transforming schools and communities. Making this move from the micro to macro level requires relational trust. Fullan asserts that leadership must take up the challenge of leading schools through complex reform agendas by developing trust and discipline. Furthermore, working collectively to strengthen schools through shared leadership, focusing on society as a whole beyond just a focus on individual schools, and developing the trust needed to move schools are the basic guidelines for Fullan’s efforts to encourage school leaders to change schools through moral imperative.

Fullan is not the only scholar who subscribes to the notion that moral imperative is essential to school leadership. Pellicer (2003) advances a similar argument. Reflecting on his experiences in the realm of education and how those experiences influenced his leadership ability, Pellicer submits that care and concern must be at the center of leadership practice. Almost apologetically, Pellicer puts forth his shortcomings as a way of helping fellow leaders



to avoid the pitfall of being self-absorbed to the point where actions are carried out to gratify self rather than others. Taking action to improve schools is a matter of heart; one must be interested in more than self in order to make changes that impact society positively.

Pellicer discusses the disadvantage that being self-absorbed creates for a society. Giving leaders a number of important questions to reflect on, he outlines his book so that one might discover through reflective inquiry what it takes to lead in such turbulent times. He asserts, "Caring is the central quality that gives human beings a purpose in life—a reason to get up in the morning—even the will to live" (p. 27). This being the case, leading with moral imperative requires that one refute natural human tendencies to be self-absorbed. Pellicer believes that "what one cares about is what one is willing to fight for" (p. 27). Sometimes doing what needs to be done for equitable education for all students means that one may not see benefits for self. In an example given by Pellicer regarding shared power, he reveals a lesson learned about schools: "School isn't going anywhere that all of us—teachers, staff, students, and administrators—don't want it to go" (p. 54). Leaders must be willing to share power in order to move schools.

Sharing power equates to sharing responsibility, and what school would argue for less shared responsibility? Many leaders declare the goodness of sharing responsibility in schools. Sergiovanni (1992) refers to the moral imperative as what is "good." It is good for leaders to share in the responsibility of acting with the best intentions of all students at heart, creating the virtuous schools that Sergiovanni discusses in *Moral Leadership*. He outlines four quadrants to discuss the concepts of moral and managerial imperative, asserting that virtuous schools strive to act from within the quadrant that is both moral and effective. Further defining what it means to have a moral basis, Sergiovanni maintains that we must not be tempted to use others for our own purposes; rather, we should have school purposes and job-related objectives in mind as the primary reasons for seeking to change things.

Leading with moral imperative and seeking out school reform that embraces the diversity of all students, is acting with a purpose in mind beyond oneself. Hoping that individuals will rethink what school leadership can and should look like, Sergiovanni has outlined characteristics and viewpoints of leaders who engage with the morals necessary to create environments in schools where all students can be successful. Sergiovanni concludes by attempting to answer the question of what it takes for educational leaders to shift the thinking away from getting people to follow by persuasion to putting an emphasis on meaning. Individuals will act with moral imperative when meaning beyond oneself transcends the inherent nature to look inward.

A STUDY IN MORAL IMPERATIVE

Two suburban school districts participated in this research project, one located in a Southwestern state and the other in a Midwestern state. While the Southwestern district is considerably larger (39,000 students) than the Midwestern (2,521 students), both are located immediately outside a large urban center and are experiencing rapid demographic change. In the last 10 years, the Southwestern district has shifted from serving a predominately White, middle class student body to one that is more ethnically and economically diverse, with Latinos comprising the largest population (23%). The Midwestern district is undergoing a similar transition, with African Americans being the fastest growing group. In both districts, approximately 90% of the teaching staff and administration is White.

The purpose of the project was to develop cultural understanding and skill in a select group of school leaders (i.e., principals and central office staff) and teachers, who would in turn build capacity within the district by formally training others, informally sharing technical knowledge and resources, and challenging and reframing deficit thinking that surfaced among colleagues. The training model was two-pronged. For teachers, the training focused on developing an awareness of barriers to equity, such as deficit thinking and inequitable instructional practices, and on identifying strategies to make classrooms more culturally responsive. Professional development for administrators also focused on deficit thinking, as well as developing an awareness of systemic barriers in the form of inequitable practices, policies, and procedures and identifying strategies for modifying these to make the district more culturally responsive. An important aspect of the model was surfacing participants' beliefs so that deficit beliefs could be explored, challenged, and reframed.

At the beginning of the first professional development session at each research site, a pre-measure was admin-

istered to a total of 201 participants. Seventy-three of the participants were administrators (i.e., principals and central office staff) and 128 were teachers. The instrument measured participants' level of cultural awareness, application of cultural knowledge, and deficit beliefs about diverse students and families. Six days of diversity training were then delivered during the school year. At the conclusion of the year-long program, participants were asked to complete an evaluation form. This post-measure consisted of open-ended questions related to knowledge gained, impact on professional practice, a call to action, and observed changes at the campus and district levels. The data from the belief survey and evaluations were then analyzed using a constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Analysis of the baseline measures indicated that, in both districts, the majority of educators appeared to have, at best, a general awareness of culture. Moreover, the majority of participants held deficit beliefs about diverse students and their families. At the conclusion of the diversity training program, participants reported a heightened awareness of their own and others' deficit thinking and increased cultural awareness and use of cultural knowledge. What this data suggests is that the two districts were alike in many ways. However, further analysis of the data suggested that there was an important distinction between the two. From the onset of the study, the teachers in the Midwestern district tended to express more numerous and more severe deficit beliefs than teachers in the Southwestern district, and Midwestern teachers were more resistant to the idea of changing educator practice to address inequities. At the conclusion of the diversity training program, this distinction remained.

Given this data, it would ostensibly seem, then, that leaders in the Midwestern district faced a greater challenge in continuing to move their district toward cultural responsiveness. Yet, in an examination of district efforts since the conclusion of the diversity training program, we discovered that, while the work continues in both districts, the Midwestern district appears to be working much more purposefully in this direction. In an effort to better understand factors that both facilitated and inhibited action in these two districts, a leader from each district was interviewed related to the districts' efforts to become culturally responsive. The two leaders were purposefully selected because they held positions of authority within their respective districts that would seemingly allow them to initiate systemic change (e.g., executive level administration). Additionally, the selected participants played a key role in the districts' efforts to become culturally responsive.

FINDINGS

Three themes emerged from the interview data. The first two themes, *systems approach* and *community context*, suggest the two districts are more alike than different. The third theme, *moral imperative*, distinguishes one district from another and lends support to Fullan's (2003) assertion that acting with moral imperative is essential to creating lasting improvement in schools, particularly as it relates to creating schools to serve the increasingly diverse student population.

Systemic Approach

Both participants indicated awareness that becoming culturally responsive would require systemic change. Each seemed to understand that it is not enough to take isolated steps toward improvement; rather, they suggested their districts would need to incorporate cultural responsiveness into all aspects of district work. Each participant articulated measures that had been taken to ensure that cultural responsiveness became a systemic reform. For example, in the Southwestern district, the district provided training for personnel at all levels of the organization. In addition to teachers and principals, support staff such as counselors, diagnosticians, parent liaisons, and central office department directors received training in cultural responsiveness. Similarly, the Midwestern district also provided training to staff in a variety of positions at all levels of the organization. In this regard, the districts were very similar.

Community Context

The leaders in both districts suggested that the community context presented a challenge for them in their work to help the district become culturally responsive. Both leaders indicated that, in their respective districts, those who work in the schools are much more keenly aware of and open to the demographic shifts than those in the general community. Each described the majority of community leaders as being in denial about the extent and the inevitabil-



ity of the demographic change. Further, each described the county in which his/her district is located as being politically conservative and acknowledged that the district itself was a “White flight” district. They both suggested that their communities had reputations for being, at best, indifferent to diversity issues. For example, in the Southwestern district a new subdivision, *The Plantation*, recently opened. Virtually no one in the community discussed, much less protested, the name. In the Midwestern community, the leader asserted “racist” election ads were being shown. These ads were playing “only in that county” (rather than in the more racially diverse adjacent counties), which she offered as evidence that the community has a reputation for tolerating racism. Neither participant offered his/her description of the community in a disparaging manner. Rather, the participants seemed to be presenting evidence of the challenges they face as leaders who are trying to move school districts toward cultural responsiveness without strong support, and with, at times opposition from the community.

Moral Imperative

Although the data suggest the two leaders in this study have much in common in terms of their desire to create culturally responsive schools and the circumstances in which they are trying to do this work, data related to how they have responded to their work suggests a distinct difference between the two.

For example, in discussing how he plans to continue moving his district toward cultural responsiveness and address system inequities, the leader in the Southwestern district indicated that he would continue to support training for district personnel in the hopes of building a critical mass of people who will help to transform the district. When presented with evidence to suggest that training alone is not likely to transform the district and that, in fact, some school leaders who have received the training are not supportive of it and are actually working against it, the leader acknowledged that he faces a dilemma:

Do I do the right thing or do I do the easy thing? I have to face these people not just here in the district, but I have to sit next to them on Sunday in church. Doing the right thing means I might not be here to continue the work.

As he spoke these words, everything about this leader, his tone, his demeanor, his expression, suggested he is perplexed and saddened about the predicament in which he finds himself. He seems to know he *should act*, but he is apparently unable to bring himself to do so. His statement suggests he perceives personal risk in acting to change an inequitable system. He seems to believe that he could lose his job if he were to act too forcefully in addressing inequity in the district. Moreover, he seems concerned with the possibility of being socially ostracized by the community. These conflicts appear to be a source of moral dissonance for him, and he seemed at a loss as to how to resolve it. Without the urgency moral imperative provides, this leader is seemingly unable to transcend his fear and act.

The leader from the Midwestern district also perceived personal risk in taking action to address inequity. However, she has taken action in spite of this perceived risk. She discussed and provided evidence of how the district is weaving cultural responsiveness into their daily work not only through continued professional development, but also through formal and informal conversation, by regularly examining data for signs of improvement, and by empowering students with cultural knowledge. She referred to this as a “layered” approach to building cultural responsiveness.

She also indicated that part of this work is taking a stand for equity, even in the face of resistance. To illustrate this point, she related a recent incident that occurred in the district. The incident began when a sixth grade boy was found to have a note with a list of student names and the word “kill” at the top. This boy had been “picked on by Black and White kids, and people would say things about him” because “he didn’t have a lot of good clothes... was very dark skinned, ... and wasn’t very high achieving.” He was frustrated by this and, as a coping strategy, the counselor told him he should write about it. One of the girls, who was “more than determined to tease him,” found the paper and took it to the teacher. Both the principal and the counselor spoke with the student and determined that he was not a threat, but they asked that he have a psychological evaluation before returning to school, which he did. An aide was placed in the classroom as a precautionary measure and to allay parent concerns. One parent was not satisfied with this and started a petition to have the child expelled. The Midwestern leader relayed what happened next:

She goes after [the school principal] and she goes after me. She starts her own little campaign. She starts petitioning... that they want this kid kicked out. It just turns into this huge community incident. She is going to all the different schools, starting her petition. She continuously gathers parents to talk to them and they never let

it die. They keep going with it and going with it. They start going door to door, telling people that I am married to a Black man, [and] that I believe in peaceful integration.... They are constantly calling the radio stations, TV stations, and emailing them to try to get them to run a story.... The [school] board didn't react to the parents and eventually it was decided, but it has never really gone away.... They were out for blood. They wanted this kid gone. This kid represented everything that they didn't want happening in the schools, all the changes they didn't want. They don't want kids like him. They definitely don't want poor Black kids in their schools, and he became a symbol of that, and it was bad.

When asked to explain why she was willing to fight so hard for this student, the Midwestern leader stated, "Everybody around me, including the former superintendent, told me to 'just cut your losses and get rid of the kid.' But that is what everybody does.... I didn't want them to be able to win one more time." When asked what advice she would have for other leaders who find themselves in similar situations, she responded

I think you have to be really careful. It depends where you are in your career. The one advantage I had is that this is my thirty-fifth year, and I could walk out the door if I absolutely have to. I think it's a lot harder when you're a young person with a young family and in a situation like this one.

In other words, the risk for her is not as great as it is for her counterpart in the Southwestern district. She feels freer to act than perhaps her counterpart does. When pressed about what this means and whether she would have acted had she not had the luxury of being in a position to retire if need be, she thought for a moment and then responded

I think I would have done the same thing because I have done it before.... I walked out of a school and quit a job. [The] principal was a really corrupt guy. The principal told me that I couldn't have the money that my cheerleaders had won at a competition. I wanted it so we could buy new uniforms. It was a very poor inner city school. He said, "You can't have the money." I said to him, "Well then I'm not going to work here anymore." I just walked out of the office. I don't know. It's just the way I was raised.

The Midwestern leader went on to relate other times in her career when she acted on principle, even at personal risk, and conveyed that, for her, there really is no other way, particularly in regard to equity issues. She explained her approach to working with moral imperative:

You have to find those people who are going to stand with you and by your allies and then, when you have those times when you have to take a stand, you have to have personal courage. It's not going to be fun. Personal courage sounds a lot better when you read it from a book.

Although her willingness to take a stand and be courageous was the strongest evidence that this leader works with moral imperative, it was not the only evidence we saw. Moral imperative was evident in all aspects of her work. It would be difficult to spend any amount of time with her without knowing that she is committed to educational equity. Whereas the leader in the Southwestern district shared his commitment seemingly with only likeminded individuals and only when asked, this Midwestern leader made educational equity the topic of every interaction and conveyed that becoming culturally responsive was an unquestionable goal for everyone in the district—from the students, to the teachers, to the administrators.

DISCUSSION

For those who have studied issues of social justice in educational leadership, the evidence from this study is perhaps not surprising. We have long known that creating equitable educational environments is a sizeable challenge and that it is not enough for leaders to want to create culturally responsive schools. Leaders must relentlessly work toward that end, and, even then, there is no guarantee of success. What this study adds to the discourse is evidence of the difference that working with moral imperative makes. When that moral imperative is absent, as appears to be the case with the leader of the Southwestern district, reform efforts stall and persistent inequities remain. Conversely, when moral imperative is at the center of a leader's work, schools and districts can make progress toward becoming culturally responsive, even in an environment that is seemingly resistant, as in the Midwestern district.



This raises important questions for educational leadership preparation programs. Specifically, how do we develop moral imperative in school leaders? The leader in this study who appears to be working with moral imperative suggested that she developed this disposition because of the way she was raised. Does this mean that moral imperative is something leaders bring with them to practice rather than developing it along the way? How, then, do we assist school leaders like the one in the Southwestern district to resolve the moral dissonance that results when one knows what *should* be done to ensure equity for all children, but cannot bring him or herself to do it? In other words, what is the role of preparation programs in developing moral imperative (Fullan, 2003) among current and prospective leaders so they can do what is right rather than what is easy?

Some scholars (e.g., McKenzie et al., 2007) have suggested school leadership programs should admit only those who already possess an awareness of and commitment to eradicating educational inequity—in other words, those with moral imperative. By admitting only students with at least a minimal equity consciousness, McKenzie et al. submit, leadership programs stand a better chance of developing the kinds of leaders who are equipped to create equitable learning environments. McKenzie et al. reason that school leadership programs have relatively little time to work with aspiring leaders and that time should be spent developing knowledge and skills rather than raising equity consciousness.

Initially, we believed the results of this study supported McKenzie et al.'s (2007) position. The leader of the Midwestern district appears to have come to the practice of school leadership with moral imperative in hand, and this has guided her work. However, after presenting this research at a conference, we were prompted to look at the data through another lens. A scholar who read our research asked us why we had not considered the role gender played in the two leaders' approaches. "Gender?" we wondered. How could we consider gender when we had studied only two leaders—one male and one female? And, yet, as we thought carefully about the scholar's comments on our work, we agreed that, yes, we needed to consider gender.

As we went back to the data and delved deeper, we discovered that gender, in fact, did seem to play a central role in how these two leaders approached their work. The work of the Midwestern leader embodied aspects of leadership that are often associated with women's ways of leading: 1) instructional leadership; 2) relationships; 3) community building; and 4) ethic of care (Shakeshaft, 1987). Conversely, the leadership style of the Southwestern leader was more consistent with the authoritative, technical approach associated with male leadership. In reexamining the data with this new lens, we saw a clear connection between Fullan's (2003) moral imperative and women's ways of leading. Fullan's call for school leaders to transcend from a focus on the individual to a focus on the collective and his assertion that doing so will require leaders to build trusting cultures is directly in line with women's ways of leading. Perhaps, then, the Midwestern leader's success in moving her district toward cultural responsiveness is due not only to the moral imperative she brought to her practice, but also to the feminine leadership skills she has developed and employs.

While the sample in this study is too small to make generalizations, the results of this study do raise interesting questions about the connection between moral imperative and ways of leading that have been associated with females. Understanding the relationship between these two phenomena may help school leadership programs better understand how to develop leaders who work with moral imperative.

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Sarah W. Nelson, Ph.D. (swnelson@txstate.edu) is an Associate Professor at Texas State University in the Education and Community Leadership and Education Ph.D. programs. She teaches courses in principal preparation, research, school law, educational policy, and educational environments. Her research interests center on policies and practices to address educational inequity. Before joining the faculty at Texas State University, Sarah served as the principal and instructional leader of a large urban elementary school. She continues to work in the field with educators to develop culturally responsive teaching and learning environments and to create community-based leadership practices.

Patricia L. Guerra, Ph.D. (pg16@txstate.edu) is an Assistant Professor in the Education and Community Leadership program at Texas State University–San Marcos where she teaches graduate courses in social justice leadership and culturally responsive instructional supervision and school improvement. Her research interests include: culturally responsive schooling, educator beliefs about diversity and educational equity. Prior to Texas State University, Dr. Guerra was Co-Director of the Leadership for Equity and Access Project based at the University of Texas at Austin and she also served as a school leader. In addition to her work at the university, she provides professional development on developing culturally responsive classrooms and schools for educators in the field.

Genise Henry (ghenry@mail.utexas.edu) is a doctoral student in the School Improvement program at Texas State University. In addition, she works as a Senior Field Trainer/Analyst for the Vaughn-Gross Center for Reading and Language Arts in the College of Education at the University of Texas at Austin. Her research focuses on the influence of spirituality in the leadership experiences of African American women working for social justice in educational environments.