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Alice and Rachel:
Teacher Leaders of Color

An unspoken space exists between the understandings of issues of equity held by white women and by women of color. Although we seem to agree on the goal to eliminate gender bias in mathematics education, we enter the arena carrying with us very different baggage, in the form of our prior experiences. In this chapter I will talk about Alice and Rachel, two teacher leaders of color. Although they have never met, I have woven together their stories to help explain what it is like for women of color when they decide to take leadership on issues of equity in mathematics education.

A comprehensive study of female administrative aspirants found that competition exists between minority and white females (Banks 1995). This finding raises an important question about the extent to which white women and women of color will support and cooperate with each other. The reality of competition in the workplace may result in the perception that the advancement of one group of females may hinder the advancement of other groups. Statistics from the U.S. Department of Labor clearly indicate that the dual status of minority and female results in lower earning power for black women, thus disproving the myth that black women get top jobs simply because they are minority women. Although women and minorities encounter barriers to leadership positions, minority women confront both gender and racial barriers (Edson 1987; McCarthy 1993).

There may be a connection between the small number of studies on minority women in school administration and the low number of minority women actually in school administration. Women of color were almost completely absent from the decades-long scientific research on leadership until the late 1970s. Research on and by women of color in educational leadership continues to be scant. The lack of research on women of color in leadership was not viewed as problematic because race was not considered a difference of consequence.

Generally, issues of race and gender have been explored as independent processes. Considerably more research is available on women than on people of color in educational leadership. This tendency ignores women of color as an integrated whole and instead presents them as fragments. Yet for women of color, experiences of discrimination are based on two factors:

race and sex. Researchers seemed to assume that their findings could be applied without regard for race.

Also lacking in the current research are ways that administrators, professional developers, and policy makers can encourage and support racially diverse teacher leadership capable of bringing alternative perspectives to the development and implementation of policies that affect underrepresented students. The lack of acceptance of, and support for, a variety of forms of leadership is an impediment to the development of educational leadership among women of color.

Alice and Rachel: Two Teachers of Color

I know Alice and Rachel from their participation in a number of mathematics equity education projects. They are both classroom teachers and leaders at their Southern California schools. Alice is an African American mathematics teacher at a junior high school; Rachel is a Chicana teaching bilingual kindergarten in a barrio elementary school.

Growing up in South-central Los Angeles, Alice echoed the struggles faced by many young people learning to survive in high-poverty communities. Although she dropped out of high school at 15, she always knew that she was smart. Alice held onto the dream that despite the obstacles, one day she would attend college. She saw this as her only way out of the struggles she witnessed and participated in daily. Hers was a world of inequities and human tragedy that few in the mainstream culture will ever know. Even through her serious involvement with drugs and the birth of her son before she was 18 years old, Alice held on to her plan for finding a way to a better life. Alice credits part of the realization of her plan to become a teacher to the support of the man she married.

Rachel, one of eight children, grew up in a agricultural community. She has found her role in leadership to be "scary." Although she doesn't find it difficult to "get up sometimes and talk", mathematics is an area in which she doesn't feel a sense of expertise. Like many bilingual teachers, she has focused her energies in areas of reading or language arts. As a college student, Rachel had no intention of teaching until she worked at a prison for youthful offenders:

It was just a nightmare, a living hell. When you go there, you can just see that the inmate population is so disproportionately minority. I came into teaching with a very clear desire to make a difference for the kids so that they wouldn't end up over there. All through school I had no desire

to be a teacher. None whatsoever. I just never want to see any of these kids over there and I see the way society is laid out. There's not a lot of options for a lot of people of color. There's not a lot of options in your life really if you do not have an education. It should be society's big push, to give these children everything we can now because it's going to benefit us later. And if we don't, the opposite is going to happen. That's what's happening. When I am working [with students in the classroom], I am thinking of those kids. I always remember when I was leaving on my last day. A boy was yelling at me through the bars on the window as I walked by, "Don't forget about us. Don't forget about us here." It's a very emotional thing to remember (crying) because I do [remember].

Taking Leadership

Enthusiastic and ambitious, Alice is always thinking about ways to continue to grow and learn. She has eagerly enrolled "in every workshop. You name it, I'm there," even when she must pay her own way. She believes that by putting more into her own development, she will have more to give to her work. Alice admits that initially she didn't view herself as a leader, whom she defines as "someone who cares enough about an issue to give some expertise in that matter and then share it with others." She thoughtfully remarks that she has "become that teacher leader." Yet, the realities of accepting this role have brought about many unforeseen challenges, and Alice's leadership role has not been easily acquired:

The offers to do more leadership activities came in my second year of teaching, but on the other hand, I'm not treated as a teacher leader in my district, not in my site. When I was in one position, they didn't think of me as a teacher leader. They certainly treated me as a rookie.

Rachel's zest and passion for students have moved her into a number of leadership roles in her school and district. Taking leadership has meant being uncomfortable by not necessarily agreeing with the status quo. She believes that taking leadership doesn't require being an "expert." Rather, it requires being able to recognize something as important and to be willing to work towards improving the situation. It is this belief that keeps her willing to stand up and do the scary stuff. However, this has not been easy for Rachel, who has seriously considered removing herself from the role. But then she wonders, if she quits, who will take her place? Being a leader is not something she had intentionally sought to do:

I never wanted to be a leader, really. I like to be the person that does good things and fades into the woodwork. Because with leadership comes a certain amount of visibility and with that visibility come other things, too. Things that I necessarily don't want. But it boils down to putting your money where your mouth is. If you believe it, you do it. If you are going to wait for someone else to do it, you could wait a long time. Everyone wants to get along and be nice. I understand that, but I think I have to make a stand when it comes to these kids and be willing to stand up and be counted or have stones thrown at me or whatever. It's real important to do that because that's the only way to contest and contradict the way the system has been functioning and to make a change. I think it has to be made public because a lot of people don't even realize that there is a problem. [In the project] we say a leader is someone who takes responsibility of what matters to her. That has done more for me, that definition, than I can ever say.

Gender, Class, and Race Bias

Issues of race and socioeconomic class appear to outweigh Alice's and Rachel's concerns about gender issues. In reality, it is the complex mingling of these issues that makes it inappropriate to try to isolate gender. Examining and discussing gender alone will not help us understand how bias has affected women and girls of color.

Interestingly, important incidents in the lives of Rachel and Alice that have had strong implications for their equity work involve what happened to their brothers in school. Alice shared her emotions:

I have examples of friends I knew who were so smart. That is another thing that rages inside of me. I talk about it all the time. I had a brother who was way better in math than me. Somehow he was rejected by the system. He didn't just drop out, he was forced out. This makes me more passionate and probably aggressive about telling kids the things that I wasn't told. Sometimes I think I get too passionate, and I get my feelings hurt when I don't get the response I want. I hurt a lot about that. I'm burning with this thing that I care about. If I could wake up one morning and not care about it, my life might be easier. I wouldn't have to do any of the things I do other than teach, go home, and get my check on the first. But this is the thing that I care about. It causes me to cry at night and it causes me to dance on the tables, too.

Rachel described her brother's experience:

Going through school, I saw things that I knew weren't right. Different people were treated [badly], just because of their ethnicity or their handicap. That sensitized me quite a bit. I have this older brother. I consider him brilliant, incredibly intelligent, but he was never [encouraged] in school and he became very, very frustrated. He has read more than most college peers that I know. He can discuss incredible things. I see how he was hurt by the system that didn't recognize his intelligence and didn't reinforce it, didn't validate him and saw him as a loser. I see how that has happened to other people. That has always been an issue with me. I want to do something so that won't happen to somebody else.

As Alice continues to gain confidence in her expertise and knowledge, she seeks ways of working with others to bring about the changes that she believes need to happen. Unfortunately, Alice also continues to be saddened and increasingly embittered by the lack of support at her school site. In addition to attributing much of this negativity to her new-teacher status, Alice believes that racism is at work:

I think my few years of teaching have something to do with it. I think that color has a lot to do with it. If we look at people who know mathematics, you wouldn't look at an African American, because we tend to score low or lowest. I think there is some baggage that is carried into the leadership world. So here is a person who traditionally hasn't scored high, wasn't in the AP classes, wasn't in the A-F classes, and here she emerges. [I think they wonder] "I never saw you in any of my classes." I think it has some backlash to it. So people don't see me as a mathematician. My teacher experience and my color stand in my way.

Racism affects individual as well as institutional responses to people of color. Selective perception and reinforcement are used to deny variability among people of color in such areas as intellect and accomplishment. Rachel believes that teachers' assumptions of children's capabilities, even when they come from a desire to help the child, can at times be misguided. Rachel talks about how racism is a topic around which so many educators are "incredibly touchy":

People who have ideas that actually can be termed *racist* don't see it in themselves and they don't see it in the thought,

the racist thought. It is like we are talking in two different dimensions here. They don't even understand what they are saying. If you ever told them that what they are saying is unfair or untrue or racist or whatever, they will be the first to deny it. It's there and I've seen it.

Alice and Rachel believe that the challenge is to provide rich mathematical experiences for all children at all levels and to not use the different challenges as excuses for not doing so, as Rachel expressed:

I think that the challenge is going to be for teachers who care to get the things together that can provide kids with the types of mathematical experiences that will really teach them math, and not some rote something that they'll never use again in their life. And to not water it down so much and to not assume because it's going to this kind of kid or with this type of language, that it has to be that much different. It really doesn't have to be. They're totally as capable on all levels.

The issues of race and gender are foremost on the mind of Rachel as she ponders their influence in mathematics education:

Why are most higher-level mathematicians basically of one gender and race? The more I think about the world and world issues and who has say, [the more I realize] it's going to be the people who have the skills and knowledge. It's given me another piece of the big picture. It's made me want to put more effort into my mathematics curriculum. I thought math was important but reading and language arts were more important. Now I see the role mathematics plays in creativity and enlarging the mind. I see mathematics as an important, vital tool for the liberation of any young mind. I think kids are frustrated and angry because they do not see their options and they have been educated with blinders on and they are not even aware of the potential that is out there. We need to teach them to be questioning thinkers. It's critical for their life, for their life survival, the survival of their psyche, their self-esteem, and everything else.

The Projects

Rachel and Alice have been participants and leadership-team members for projects that focus deeply on issues of equity and leadership in mathematics education: a statewide project funded by the California

Mathematics Project and two other projects, a local systemic initiative and a national institute, funded by the National Science Foundation. In each project, at least 50 percent of participants are educators of color.

The projects' primary goal is to promote equity within mathematics education. The projects are based on (1) the mathematics-reform and educational-change literature, (2) the research on achievement of underrepresented groups, (3) experience in several earlier projects, and (4) more than a decade of consultation with teachers and educational leaders at state and national levels. The projects strive to create an infrastructure to support educators' addressing equity in mathematics education in ways that produce significant changes in the mathematical experiences of students from underrepresented groups (Weissglass 1996).

The Support Structures

Structures that provide emotional support to enable teachers to move along the stages of developing leadership form an essential component of the work done in the projects. In these structures, two or more individuals equally share listening and speaking time, without giving opinions or advice. These structures are rooted in the theory of constructivist listening, which views intelligence as a flexible and adaptive human characteristic. This theory holds that an individual is capable of solving his or her own difficulties if given enough attention as he or she talks about it. The constructivist listening structures fall into three categories:

- Dyad—the exchange between two people of listening and talking for a fixed period of time;
- Support groups—the exchange of listening among a small group of individuals. Each person talks for a fixed amount of time while the others listen attentively; and
- Personal-experience panels—the opportunity for a small number of people to have a fixed amount of time to talk to a larger group about their personal experiences related to a particular topic.

The constructivist listener aims to enable the talker to express his or her feelings, to construct personal understanding, and to use his or her full intelligence to respond creatively to situations rather than to rely on habits or old coping strategies (Weissglass 1990).

Alice has found that the support structures afford her an opportunity to be listened to and have shortened the "muddle period" she needs for solving a

problem. Through her roles as a participant and a support-group leader, she has had an opportunity to think about how her feelings and emotions have changed as she takes on more and more leadership. She has found what she refers to as a "new fire for clarity" as she thinks about the ideas raised that have significance for "just about every issue" in her life:

I know that one of the most important things that I have gotten is to be able to [be listened to as I] talk. I use to just like talking to myself by writing to myself. I was a journal writer, but now it is just like, "What do you think of this." So I learned how to get support for myself and to reach out to people. If I am talking to you, it is real interest that I have. I'm really trying to get something for myself and I hope that I give something back.

The emotional support that Alice and Rachel have received in the projects has affected their ability to bring about changes in their classrooms. Alice has taken this support back to her students. She now spends more time encouraging them to listen to, and talk with, one another. Although she hasn't quite found a way to replicate support groups, she regularly uses dyads with her students:

I do tell my kids, "You're going to make it based on the support you make right now, the alliances you make right now. I know you and we're together and we can pull from each other." So I try, with every cooperative group, to get some alliances built so that they are really dependent on each other, supporting each other. But I am just beginning.

Rachel appreciates the support structures and the opportunity to discuss and share important issues with colleagues:

I feel stronger in terms of my beliefs and what I'm doing and in my ability to discuss these issues. I feel that my opinions are not way out. They're actually valid opinions, and I have a right to share and express them and [provide] some insight to people. So it's been really validating to me.

The support structures are based on the belief that distress, or the accumulation of unreleased emotions left from hurtful experiences, is a primary source of unintelligent and uncaring behaviors. The natural physiological process of emotional release contributes to the recovery from the effects of distress, which leads to clearer thinking. Alice has experienced the benefits of emotional release around the issues that affect

her leadership. From the moment she was introduced to this concept, she felt it ring true for her. As she found ways to release her emotions, she understood more clearly the leadership role she would choose to take. Alice believes that it has enabled her to find the truth that was already inside of her:

I believe that by working with teachers, I can change them and then have an impact on more kids. I don't want to lead just to lead. I like to lead because I want the desired effect. I want my brother and my sister to be in the classroom and to feel comfortable there. That's my wish and desire.

Rachel describes the support she has received as necessary for her to continue in her work. She believes that people who are attempting to change schools must have support. She realizes that it is very easy for her to get caught up in the day-to-day challenges and site and district issues that affect her work. The support structures help her clarify her thinking and facilitate her ability to make decisions in a rational way:

The structures foster a lot of safety in sharing. That is to me one of the best things about [the project]. People are able to reveal themselves in a very deep level yet feel safe. Confidentiality and the rules of taking turns when we speak [foster] mutual respect. People are seen as equals, with nobody having any more right to speak than another person. The rules have built in the underlying message of equity and respect for people.

An Issue of Trust

Trust, another component addressed in the projects, has particular significance for Alice and Rachel. It has helped them take action. Before coming to the projects, Alice was not aware of the important role that trust plays in relationships. She now views trust as the primary component of the work she does and uses questions about trust as her guide for deciding the work she is willing to take on. In the projects, she has experienced the power of talking about a problem with several people she trusts, and she feels empowered to act on her decisions. Through discussions with trusted individuals, she can talk about her actions and explore new ideas. This situation builds the supportive environment that she needs to contradict the unhappy situation she finds at her school site:

The word came back today over and over again, trust. [I need to] stop putting my confidence in nontrustful situations, then I

won't have to spend a lot of time healing myself. . . . This situation that I am into now I got into before I met [the projects] and if I would have asked these questions [about trust], I would have never got into it. All the signs were there that they are not trustful folks. I could breath fire out of my mouth and nose because the signs were there and I shouldn't have trusted, but I did. And so now everything is about betrayal, as sure as the night follows the day.

Alice believes that her assumptions and beliefs about learning, teaching, and the purpose of school and about issues of race, class, and gender bias have been "substantiated." The discussion in the projects confirmed what she already "knew to be true." Rachel wonders about the superficiality of the discussions among teachers at her school. They don't engage in the conversations that would facilitate their sharing assumptions and beliefs about teaching and learning:

That's not the type of thing you talk about. So it's hard to connect with people who have maybe similar goals, similar ideas and philosophies, unless you happen to hit it off at some other level and you become friends and you talk. And that can happen, because that has happened, and I have some good friends that have happened just that way. You can feel real isolated if you're not around other people who feel that way or are willing to be vocal about their feelings. You can feel real isolated. It has been wonderful for me to be a part of [the project]—to have these issues shared and discussed openly, in an intelligent manner, with respect for people's diverse opinions.

Summary

Women of color frequently enter educational leadership through special-project positions and are, in general, assigned to work with minorities or on minority issues. Although this work is good and necessary, it does not prepare women of color to work with white children and adults. In similar fashion, most white women are not given an opportunity to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to work effectively in addressing issues with people of color. Because of this systemic isolation of people of color from whites, it is necessary to institute structures that facilitate open and honest dialogue between the groups. It requires a safe environment in which educators can reveal, discuss, and change their assumptions about people from underrepresented groups.

Alice continues to be a potentially strong force for bringing about change in schools. Her involvement in the projects gives her the emotional support she needs through the structures and the trusting relationships she has acquired with people of backgrounds different from hers. She also values the knowledge that she has gained about constructivist and social-constructivist mathematics while focusing on issues of bias. Alice has decided to avoid working in distrustful environments and actively seeks to work where her knowledge and expertise are welcomed and supported. She continues to rely on emotional support during the difficult times as she works to improve schools for students very much like herself.

Rachel finds herself more willing to speak up to her colleagues and more willing to approach anybody, an administrator, an aide, a parent, or whomever, when she believes that a situation calls for an issue to be discussed or raised: "I don't have as much hesitancy at all about bringing up a lot of issues and raising it in regard to equity or appropriateness of the curricula or something like that."

To bring about a better understanding of how issues of race and socioeconomic class affect the lives of women, structured opportunities for honest discussion in safe and trusting environments will be necessary (Weissglass,, 1991). As educators address issues of educational change, particularly in regard to equity, they will need emotional support in addition to the content and pedagogy for meeting the challenges they will encounter. Emerging teacher leaders need support to prevent the discouragement that generally leads to burnout. Finally, for the mathematics reform community to address adequately the achievement of students of color, we must hear the voices of many experiences in the conversation. Emotional support gives strength and clarity to these voices.

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