

FROM CONNECTION TO TRANSFORMATION

AFFINITY GROUPS IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

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by

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It all started with a message on Twitter.

"Hope it's okay I reach out this way. I'm a new VP in the district and I was wondering if you know of any PVP networks in Surrey doing work around BIPOC in educational leadership or leadership in general? Specific to BIPOC women would be a bonus. I know you co-run the B.C. Women of Ed Twitter so I thought you may be a good person to ask."

The role of a school administrator is often a solitary one, shaped by a mix of challenges and successes that frequently go unnoticed. However, for those of us who walk this path as minoritized administrators, the complexity of our responsibilities are further compounded by unique layers of nuance and experiences.

It is challenging to work within an education system that was designed to uphold the power structures, values, and norms of colonial groups. Systemic biases embedded in policies and practices often result in exclusion, limited representation, and fewer opportunities. The lack of representation in leadership roles perpetuates inequities and limits opportunities for systemic change. At gatherings of school leaders, the lack of diversity can become apparent, creating a sense of isolation and unease. There is often an expectation to work harder, to serve as a "good representative" of diversity, and to navigate the mental exhaustion of challenging decisions made from a dominant perspective.

Additionally, the subtle yet pervasive impact of microaggressions presents a unique challenge that often is concealed beneath efforts to maintain harmonious relationships within school communities. For many, particularly those from immigrant backgrounds, there is a deeply ingrained mindset of staying quiet and avoiding conflict, an approach shaped by the need to adapt to a culture markedly different from their own.

What began as a simple idea to gather like-minded people and share stories evolved over two and a half years into an affinity group specifically for BIPOC

(Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) women in education leadership.

Affinity groups provide a safe space for people with shared identities or experiences to connect, share, and support one another. These spaces foster a sense of understanding, value, and belonging. Affinity groups create powerful spaces where people can drop their bags on the floor and take a breath, witness each other's experiences, and hold each other up.

Our affinity group started off small and slow. Naturally, there was some hesitancy and nervousness about gathering as BIPOC women, especially since we faced questions like:

Can white women be included?

Can BIPOC men join?

What kind of funding are you seeking?

Why can't we try to be all the same?

Will this group further marginalize us from other administrators?

Being challenged created a sense of defensiveness. It felt as though the existence of the group was being questioned, raising concerns about whether the protective reaction was overly "sensitive." There had been no anticipation that the space created would need to be actively defended.

Our group began with an idea, a conversation on Twitter, and a vague note in a confidential memo for administrators. At that time, there was no vision, just the deep need for connection. In the early days of meeting as a group, we discussed our purpose and, beyond that, why we needed to exist. As the group expanded, it became clear that although we were all looking for connection, the "why" was more complex.

Over the years, we have discussed having a clear definition or direction beyond providing spaces to connect but, as time has progressed, it has been left open-ended. This is purposeful, as definition can be limiting. Instead of a fixed definition, we

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have embraced a shared vision: to stay open to connections, ideas, and possibilities as we continually learn and evolve.

This shared vision comes to life in our BIPOC Women in Education Leadership Network in the variety of opportunities we have provided to our members. We meet informally at restaurants, where we come together to share our experiences and cultivate deeper connections in a relaxed setting. We have offered coaching sessions tailored to the unique needs of our members, providing them with personalized support and opportunities for professional growth. To foster creativity and fun, we have hosted imaginative activities like paint nights. Additionally, we have invited speakers to present valuable information, resources, and perspectives that enrich both our personal and professional journeys.

As a result of these opportunities, our stories of identity, intersectionality, adversity, and success can be shared with our wider communities. Stories draw people together and have pushed us to reflect; they allow us to better understand and challenge colonial systems that hold us back.

Affinity groups further the movement toward decolonization, as they create spaces where marginalized communities can reclaim and affirm

their identities, and discuss issues related to their identities, without the judgement or fragility of those who may not share their experiences. By collectively addressing and challenging systemic inequities, affinity groups work to resist colonial structures and practices. Participating in such acts of decolonization not only helps foster healing, but also plays a crucial role in dismantling systems of oppression.

The evolution of the BIPOC Women in Education Leadership Network from providing not only informal gatherings but a platform for personal and professional growth, highlights the importance of creating spaces that are not only safe but open to learning, creativity, and growth. Affinity groups play a pivotal role in fostering empowerment, dismantling systemic inequities, and creating a more inclusive, supportive environment for all.

While the BIPOC Women in Education Leadership Network started in Surrey, it has grown to include leaders across Metro Vancouver. We warmly invite more leaders to join us as we continue to expand. Our network is committed to offering meaningful opportunities for connection, collaboration, and support, and we are open to exploring ways to meet the unique needs of members in diverse locations.

Please reach out if you are interested.

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