Do NCTE's Early Career Leadership Programs Really Make a Difference? Ask Shekema Silveri!

Shekema Silveri was a 2008 recipient of NCTE's Early Career Educator of Color Leadership Award. In 2011 Silveri designed the program, with Shirley Wright, for the Early Career Educators of Color Leadership Institute in Denver, Colorado, and presented several sessions on leadership. The Council Chronicle recently posed some questions to Silveri about how these experiences have helped her in her career and what it's like to move into a role of supporting other early career educators. Read the full interview online at www.ncte.org/magazine/issues/v21-3.

What was it like to return to the Summer Leadership Institute as a leader and presenter?

Returning to the Summer Leadership Institute as the new mentor was absolutely amazing. I was so honored that my mentor, Anna J. Roseboro, had suggested me as her replacement. Her love and support has meant the world to me, and I certainly did not want to disappoint her. To help me in my first run out of the gates, NCTE Executive Director Kent Williamson appointed Shirley Wright to serve as my co-mentor. Shirley is phenomenal, and it was an honor to serve with her.

What do you enjoy most about being in the role of supporting early career educators?

I enjoy seeing them grow exponentially over the course of three short days. They develop relationships that will last a lifetime, and they begin to embrace their natural leadership ability. I understand that, like all leaders, my job is not to create faithful followers; my job is to create other leaders.

What was the most memorable moment for you?

My favorite memory will always be of the 2011 cohort developing and revising their project statements. We had the project statements posted up on walls around the room, and each of the cohort members was charged with providing feedback to their peers. Watching them encourage and build one another up was one of the proudest moments I’ve had as an educator.

What was the best piece of advice you shared at the leadership conference?

I shared the following message, among many others, with the members of the 2011 cohort. I also include it in my weekly address to my English Department:

“Remember that the seeds you’re planting for the future represent something far greater than the sacrifices you’re currently making. Challenge yourself daily to remember why you became an educator. Look into the eyes of your students and really see them . . . not their circumstances. And, as always, your challenge this week is to purposely seek out ways of helping to establish a team that is highly functional and extremely successful. Begin each day this week with the aim of learning something new about at least two of your students. Continue asking yourself this question each night before you rest: Was anyone else’s experience made better, easier, or more purposeful because I was in it? Be honest with yourself. Your answers just might surprise you.”

What effect do you expect these experiences to have on your career in years to come?

While I expect my involvement in the Early Career Educators of Color program to affect my career for years to come, I am hesitant to say how. I was named Georgia’s 2011 Milken Educator, and I never could have imagined how far this experience would take me thus far. Now, I’m just happy to continue the journey. The best is yet to come!

What other professional communities or networks are important to you as an educator?

Twitter has become my favorite professional community. My Twitter name is @mrssilveri. It’s amazing how many professional development opportunities, lesson plans, and teachable moments take place in 140 characters or less. All of the professional communities I would suggest are on Twitter, so the goal for any well-rounded, forward-thinking educator should be to create a Twitter account, to Tweet, and to follow away.
What were your initial hopes for how the Early Career Educators of Color program might be valuable to your career, and how have your experiences helped shaped your teaching?

Initially, I had no real hopes, because we were the very first cohort. I was just surprised that I was even selected. The entire process, from application until the end of the cohort institute, was like a wonderful dream.

During the institute, our mentors (Anna J. Roseboro, Alaiyo Kiasi-Brown, and Dale Allender) encouraged us to move beyond our circumstances and to aspire to heights yet unknown. Since that time, I have continued my commitment to both NCTE and its recruitment (and retention) of early career leaders of color. In 2009, I stood for national election and became chair of the Secondary Section Nominating Committee and will appear on the Secondary Section Nominating Committee ballot again in 2012.

As an educator, I have grown exponentially as a direct result of my participation in the summer leadership conference. I returned from Milwaukee with a new perspective on NCTE membership and on teacher leadership. I began to embrace my role as a leader within my building and my school district. In three years, I have become an in-service facilitator for high school teachers (both AP and regular education) and now serve as the English Department Chair at Mt. Zion High School in Jonesboro, Georgia.

Are you still in touch with educators who were part of your cohort? Will this group continue to be an important professional network for you?

Iron sharpens iron would be the theme for my experience. I met some wonderful educators, many of whom inspire me still. Though we don’t always keep in touch as much as we should and/or would like, each of us knows that we have a lifetime support system.

What’s the status of your leadership project?

My leadership project involved developing and implementing a series of professional development workshops for high school English teachers in my district. This series of workshops was designed to promote the integration of technology and media literacy in writing instruction. I’ll admit that I was somewhat disappointed in my inability to implement my project. Perhaps I was just naïve about what being a participant in the Early Career Educators of Color program would mean once I got back to my classroom. I was a winner to NCTE, but I was just another teacher to my administration and my district.

That’s when my district hired a new K–12 Language Arts Coordinator. Dr. Ebony Thomas has been one of the greatest factors in my ability to grow as a teacher leader in Clayton County Public Schools. She took a chance on me, when most others continued to overlook me, and allowed me to walk in my natural ability. Though the courses from my summer leadership project were never implemented as a direct result of my leadership project, Dr. Thomas and I have ultimately been able to facilitate PD sessions that contained each of these components.

What do you think are the biggest challenges these early educators face?

The greatest challenge these educators face is battling discouragement. It’s hard to be treated to such an indelible experience and to be built up and encouraged while with your cohort—only to return to the diurnal realities of the educational system. It can be demoralizing. I knew that the things they’ll need most are encouragement and emotional support.

That’s why I decided to add the year-round communication component to this cohort’s experience. Over the course of this year, NCTE Deputy Executive Director Mila Fuller and I will conduct a series of conference calls and webinars. To be held bi-monthly, these conference calls will offer a chance for the 2011 cohort to provide updates and garner support for the implementation of their projects, while Web seminars will feature additional training to assist cohort members with honing their leadership skills within NCTE and within their places of employment.

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