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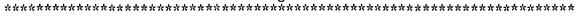IDENTIFIERS   *Arkansas State University; *Cohort Instructional
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ABSTRACT
          This study explored the perceptions of students in a
cohort based doctoral program in educational leadership at Arkansas
State University concerning the impact of the cohort structure on
their learning. The cohort groups were structured to move through the
coursework as a cohesive group. The data derived from four
cohorts--two who had completed the coursework, one in the middle of
the work, and one just beginning the program of study. Each of 42
students was interviewed to gather opinions concerning the program.
Paper-and-pencil evaluations of the doctoral program were also
completed by each cohort group. Students reported a difference in the
group dynamics over time, but each cohort developed its own
personality. Students found that collusion shut down learning,
whereas cohesion was a more appropriate and productive form of
closure that facilitated higher levels of mental processing and
opened up new ways of constructing knowledge. The findings validate
the positive benefits of the cohort structure and demonstrate the
need to emphasize cohort activities. These findings also validate the
application of principles of cognitive learning theory to program
development in educational administration. An outline of the doctoral
program course schedule is outlined. (Contains 15 references.)
(CK)

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Running head: COHESION OR COLLUSION: IMPACT OF A COHORT STRUCTURE

Cohesion or Collusion: Impact of a Cohort Structure

on Educational Leadership Doctoral Students

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Abstract

Cohort-based training programs have been used to increase the effectiveness of advanced degree programs. This exploration has been, at least in part, a reflection of the criticism aimed at educational administration training programs and corresponding perceptions that changes in administrator training were necessary. Since various reports critical of administrator training and the Danforth initiative to improve administrator training, cohort structured programs have, to varying degrees, increasingly been incorporated into administrator training programs. While some effort has been made to track movement of cohort members into administrative positions, relatively little research has been done on the impact of the cohort experience on students. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of doctoral students at Arkansas State University who were involved in a cohort based program. The doctoral program was initiated in 1992 with 10 to 15 doctoral students in each fall cohort. The cohort groups were structured to move through the coursework as a cohesive group. The study included data from four cohorts; two cohorts had completed their coursework, one cohort was in the middle of the course work, and one cohort was just beginning its program of study.

Cohesion or Collusion: Impact of a Cohort Structure

On Educational Leadership Doctoral Students

The doctoral program in educational leadership at Arkansas State University was designed with the intention of graduating students who could act as change agents in complex school environments that are resistant to change. Although much of the program was atheoretical in its design, it is evident now that we are engaged in a four-year evaluation of the program that the theoretical base of the program design comes from cognitive learning theory, and in fact much of the program mirrors the literature that calls for the application of cognitive frameworks to school leadership and its development. For example, an assumption that guided program development was that since learning advances through collaborative social interaction and social construction of knowledge (Brown, Collins, & Druid, 1989a; Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989b; Brown & Druid, 1993; Brown & Druid, 1994), students would remain in a cohort group throughout the 33 semester hours of their professional sequence of courses and emphasis would be placed on pedagogy that encourages reflection on one's own and the group's problem-solving. To further facilitate this at the programmatic level, we included integrative seminars whose content is problem-based, flexible time schedules, differentiation in residency, and coherence of progress in the sequence and content of coursework.

This program design is congruent with the assumptions put forward by a number of researchers who have shifted their attention to theories of human cognition as a better way

of explaining the nature of expert leadership (e.g., Leithwood, Begley, & Cousins, 1992;

Leithwood & Hallinger, 1993; Prestine & LeGrand, 1991). This cognitive perspective can

be traced back to Soviet theorists like Vygotsky (1978, 1988) and Leontiev and later

explored by cognitive anthropologists (Holland & Quinn, 1987; Lave, 1988, 1991) and

psychologists (Resnick, 1987; Sternberg, 1986).

From this perspective, an important feature of the program design is the cohort

structure. In this context, the rationale for using the cohort structure is based on

Vygotsky's assumption that learning is a profoundly social process that depends on

dialogue and language (1978). Since Vygotsky sees learning as a transformation of an

interpersonal (social) process to an intrapersonal process which takes place in stages of

internalization, group processing becomes an important feature of program design. And the

cohort structure is a vehicle for both formal and informal social processing, processing that,

according to Vygotsky (Wertsch, 1985), can facilitate the development of higher

psychological functioning. As Vygotsky stated: "We propose that an essential feature of

learning is that it creates the zone of proximal development; that is, learning awakens a

variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is

interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers. . . .The

essential feature of this hypothesis is the notion that developmental processes do not

coincide with learning processes, rather the developmental process lags behind the learning

process; this sequence then results in zones of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 90).

To understand the degree to which the cohort structure was a successful vehicle for this kind of group processing, it is necessary to understand students' perceptions of the impact of the cohort structure on student learning. The hypothesis is that as students develop expertise as problem-finders and problem-solvers by learning how to decontextualize information and frame questions about problems that are a part of the sociocultural settings, they are also developing higher levels of mental functioning. This study was conducted to see if the cohort structure in this doctoral program was indeed facilitating this process.

Method

In the spring of each year, members of each cohort were given an evaluation in which they assessed the quality of the doctoral program and the cohort experience. In the spring of 1996, as part of a four-year evaluation of the program, each doctoral student was interviewed to gather opinions and free associations not likely to be reflected in a structured, paper-and-pencil assessment. Graduate students were trained in the interview process and conducted the interviews. This was done to prevent obvious contamination likely if faculty were interviewing their students, most of whom still had to finish their

dissertations. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions were disarticulated

into meaningful phrases with phrases grouped into recurring ideas and themes.

Data Sources: The data come from two sources: Interviews with the 42 students

matriculated in all four of the cohort groups and paper-and-pencil evaluations of the

doctoral program by each cohort group.

Results

The results reported in this study concern the perceptions of the students about the

contribution of the cohort structure to student learning by focusing on the students'

perceptions of their cohort group as a vehicle for collusion or cohesion during their

doctoral program. These results can be summarized as follows:

Evidence of Collusion

The program design includes three, one-hour, integrative seminars which are

coupled with two three-hour courses (see Appendix for program design). These integrative

seminars are self-directed, and the content is problem-based so that students have

opportunities for social interaction and performance feedback on their attempts to translate

the theory of the class to the practice of the field. During these integrative seminars, there

is, by design, a high level of ambiguity and autonomy, and students are forced to self-

organize and create order in the form of a group project. According to the students'

perceptions, this was the time when collusion was most evident, and this collusion took both active and passive forms.

"We ate dinner together once a week between classes. These times often became gripe sessions and support sessions for cohort members. We recognized that we were all in this experience together so there was not the competition; there was no competition not like the masters or specialist programs. So, we would discuss the work load, whether or not we had finished the assigned reading and often tease those who consistently didn't finish. We talked about our writing, comps and other assignments and had a lot of personal chit-chat. We didn't become a real work group until we went through the first integrative seminar. By the time we got finished with the seminars and into the comps, we had worked through a lot of stuff. We had hammered out several differences of opinion; we agreed to disagree and still be friends and respect one another, and we moved from trying to please the professors to really

dealing with what we believed. We were less apt to include ideas that we didn't agree with. We got nailed good a couple of times for not including a certain professor's pet theories in our presentations. So we spent time developing arguments and justifications for including or not including ideas that we were sure different professors would be looking for. If we couldn't justify not including something, we would often just throw the ideas in so we wouldn't have to explain why they were left out."

As the students became a work group, it became apparent that they didn't know how to handle conflict. Some students colluded by not participating in the group project and others colluded by not holding those accountable who were not doing their "fair share."

"By the time we started into the second and especially the third integrative seminar, we were so close that we just couldn't deal with one individual who didn't show up for our meetings or do the work. Anyway, that person's writing was so bad that it was easier to just do more work than wait around for him to get busy and help."

This inappropriate closure to the dissonance created by the integrative seminar experience seems to have gender characteristics; female students seemed to be more passive in their collusion and males tended to be more active (i.e., female students tended to blame themselves and "clam up" when there was a lot of ambiguity and autonomy while male students tended to target or blame others while not taking responsibility for the learning).

Passive Collusion: (Female Response)

"For a long time I thought it was just me who was bothered by the fact that some of the cohort didn't always do as much work. There seemed to be a feeling that those of us who had taken time off to complete this degree or those of us who lived in Jonesboro could do most of the work. This made me angry after the first integrative seminar. Instead of saying anything, I just did less work and offered to type less. I learned a lot from this because the rest of the cohort did more work, and I heard more of their ideas and thinking."

Active Collusion: (Male Response)

"I was really angry that the administrators in our group forced us to be politically correct. If I were working on this alone, I would have done it much differently, better and faster, but we had to go with the pace of the group. I don't really trust these people to get the work done that we should be doing."

When students were involved in the thirty hours of course work, the collusion took more subtle forms such as not reading the assigned material; just reading the material but not actively constructing new meaning and understanding during the group interactions; and not committing time to the work of learning .

"I was working full time. The reading load was just too much. I couldn't keep up. I wish now I had put more time into the material. I've really changed because of the whole experience. I think more from interacting with the cohort rather than so much interacting with the material. That's why I like my log. I can go back and see where my thinking was and the things I was complaining about that seem so silly now. I have a better understanding of the whole process now and wish I would

have contributed more. But I guess you get out of it what you put into it."

Evidence of Cohesion

Cohesion was again most evident in the integrative seminars and was very much facilitated by the social interactions that were a part of the program design. Students had back-to-back courses during four semesters, and dinner between these classes provided a time for social interaction.

"The cohort experience was the best part of the program. Over time we became very close. I think many of these people will be life-long friends. We call each other, and I always know that if I have an administrative problem, there is someone to call-either a cohort member or one of the faculty. We became very close to the faculty. They were so helpful, supportive and listened to us even when we were just complaining to be complaining. I have never had such a good learning experience."

The cohesion was developmental and built on trust that was not easily gained, but the group projects during the integrative seminars provided a vehicle for this development.

"It took a lot of time to really get to know each other. We had dinner together between the doctoral block classes and talked a lot about our families, jobs, and life in general. We became like a family. When we were working on comps, I realized I would really miss seeing these people once a week. I still miss them. About the second or third integrative seminar we got to the point that we really trusted each other enough to get the work done. The seminars were really hard. Not only did we have to apply the material we had been covering, but we had to be able to justify our thinking when we had our presentation to the faculty. By the time we got to the comps we really felt a sense of understanding of each other and each other's strengths so we knew we had gained a lot. The product that we came up with was more than what we could have done independently. It was also good to hear how other people viewed different issues. I learned so much because other people saw things in ways that I never would have thought up. Listening to so many ideas really

changed a lot of my thinking and practice in leadership. I

think I'm a much better leader now because of this experience."

Students noticed and expressed a surprising "difference" in the program; many felt almost immediately that there were expectations for them to work as a group and interact more freely with the instructors and other class members although there were not a lot of instructions about this. For many these expectations helped break down the individual competitiveness experienced in other programs in the same department; i.e., the masters and specialist program.

"This was the best program I have ever been in. I feel like I

wasted my time in the masters and specialist programs because

they were pretty much the same old stuff. But this program was

different. It was cutting edge. I really believe management is

going to be going more and more to team decision-making

models. Many of my friends who are involved in other programs

haven't heard of Block, Senge, Doland or Claire Graves. They are

really missing out. We were working as a team because of the

cohort and integrative seminars so we not only read about

facilitating group process models, we experienced it."

Some expressed the feeling of a family atmosphere; others stated they felt like they were all in it together on equal footing and that leaders evolved as the need for leadership developed. There was a sense of an open society where people are committed to listening to each other in order to discover shared truths.

"When we working on the third integrative seminar, leadership developed out of the need to express ideas. Every member of the cohort led part of the discussion at one time or another. One member of the cohort commented that it was like everyone had their turn at the board writing down our ideas, pushing our thinking to deeper levels, and expressing our thinking more subsequently as a group and as individuals. It was like Thanksgiving Dinner. We were the family united for a feast. The many ideas about leadership, schools, learning, and facilitating progress was the feast that we were carving into. We really learned a lot from listening to each other."

Also students reported times when synergy was evident. This took place during group activities or group processing that were part of class work and also during the integrative seminars.

"One of the things that stands out to me is the social interaction. During class we were given time to work in groups to come up with some ideas about various things and then come back to present these ideas to the class. Smaller more desegregate groups like that can work on a project, and then as they present it, I think that provides more interaction because . . . of the relationship developed in the cohort working together during the integrative seminars.

It is interesting to note how the cohort structure facilitated the dissertation process. Although few students who are ABD felt that the cohort structure was helping them complete their dissertation, many students who are still involved in the coursework felt that the cohort group will have a significant effect on their completion of their dissertation.

"The Cohort experience was very good for me. I had always been a loner. I worked alone; I studied alone; I thought alone; I read alone. When I got to the dissertation process, I was no longer with the cohort, but my committee became my cohort. I felt I could call any member and get the help I needed. In that

way, the cohort experience really prepared me for the

dissertation process."

Conclusions

Students reported a difference in the group dynamics over time, but each cohort developed its own personality. When a cohort group chose to collude, it appears they were choosing an inappropriate way to get closure to the dissonance they felt either during class activities or during their group work; the collusion shut down learning whereas cohesion was a more appropriate and productive form of closure to this dissonance. In fact, the cohesion did seem to facilitate higher levels of mental processing and open up new ways of constructing knowledge.

The findings validate the positive benefits of the cohort structure and go beyond planned benefits that were perceived when the program was set in place. The findings clearly point to the need to place more emphasis on cohort activities that enhance the group processing and reflection by the cohort members. It seems that indeed it might be useful to have program markers in place at intervals in the program to measure the degree of self-organizing that is taking place and the honesty with which the members of the cohort group are interacting. These program markers would be helpful to faculty and students to the degree that they disrupt the learning and elicit honest discourse about "what is going on."

The findings also validate the application of principles of cognitive learning theory to

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program development in educational administration. Since we know that educational

administrators need to be critical thinkers engaged in active, reflective information

processing, the more we can provide opportunities for this development in formal

preparation programs, the better educational leaders will be prepared to facilitate this kind

of transformation of all kinds of work groups.

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Appendix
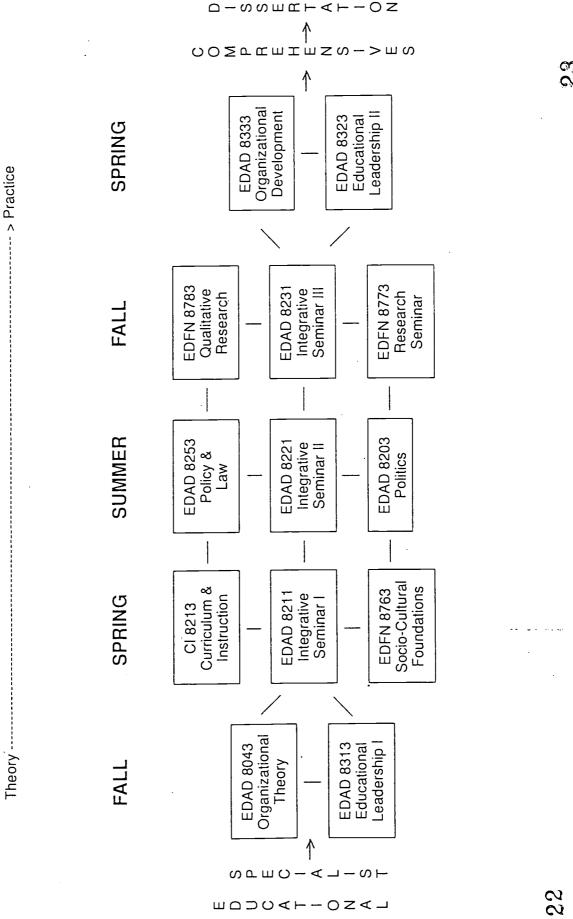
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