

LEADING, LEADERSHIP, AND LEARNING: EXPLORING NEW CONTEXTS FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN EMERGING SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS

Within the context of a pilot leadership seminar, this participatory action research project explores how to effectively lead in turbulent learning environments regulated by federal policy that mandates high levels of student achievement coupled with a rigorous standards-based reform movement. Our analysis indicates: (a) adult development is a highly complex process requiring specific learning conditions; (b) the alternative seminar provided a better context for facilitating adult leadership development than our traditional university classes or other professional development options; (c) adult developmental theory may not be an appropriate model for designing programs to support leaders who lead in turbulent environments.

It is widely understood that leading in today's school environment is not for the weak in heart or mind. The demand for such leadership requires a complex integration of skills and knowledge, enacted through the contextual adaptation of distinctive styles. Although leadership development programs can provide leaders with the technical skills from a rich foundational knowledge base, learning how to lead others involves nuanced understandings of overlapping, often conflicting systems that impact individual decision-making, calling into question perspectives and one's sense of purpose as a leader.

Learning in this instance is often an isolating and painful process that challenges one's assumptions about practices that benefit students most, how to engage in the development, management, and supervision of others, and how to create an inclusive learning community for all students, staff, and families. As if these challenges aren't enough, leaders are also expected to navigate and establish their positions with other district and community leaders within the framework of national and state educational agendas calling for higher levels of achievement by every student.

Over the past two decades, federal policy has aggressively pursued what is billed as a rigorous standards-based reform agenda. This national reform movement led to a renewed focus on instructional improvement and the leadership that fosters it. Designing and facilitating learning experiences for current and prospective leaders for such school environments necessitates innovative collaboration that is contextually-situated, personally relevant, and informed by authentic issues and experiences of leadership practice. The purpose of this participatory action research project was to explore how to effectively lead in rapidly changing school environments with an eye toward designing an empirically-based program for leadership preparation

and development that better prepares leaders for educational systems that look and function very differently from those of the past.

This research report shares initial findings from a three year examination of the work of three overlapping learning communities: a university team of four faculty members (two from the teacher education department and two from the department of educational leadership), the university team and several leaders from a county-level educational service agency, and the university team and eight school principals from three unique districts. Applying Heifetz's (1994) notion that some presenting problems for leaders exceed the limits of current technical knowledge and thus require individuals and social systems to "learn their way forward," we set out to discover the processes and practices associated with adaptive learning by education leaders as it played out in actual school settings. Our research was guided by the following questions: (a) what are the skills and capacities that current and future leaders need in order to become effective leaders, when the goal is to have every student master challenging material at high levels? (b) how is our own professional practice, working to prepare school leaders, influenced by our learning community conversations and collaboration?

Expanding the Definition of "Leadership"

Current school reform literature increasingly involves some conceptualization of teacher leadership as a means to increase student learning outcomes. Moreover, the integration of learning community models with this focus on teacher leadership has resulted in the recognition that learning to effectively lead in rapidly changing environments will require new knowledge and skills (Burke & Marx, 2011; Senge, Linchtenstein, Kaeufer, Bradbury & Carroll, 2007). It is the authors' working assumption that such knowledge and skills are deeply connected to an adult learning framework that is personally constructed by the leader. Grounded in Drago-Severson's (2009) framework on adult learning and Cuban's (2001) framework for problem-solving, we explore the contexts and processes of transformational learning, the ways in which it is understood by various actors, and those experiences that foster transformational learning for leaders in emerging school contexts. Further, this exploratory investigation is rooted in our own strongly held belief that leaders who understand their own development as learners, acting in social organizational systems, will recognize each participant as a learner whose individual development can be a key component to building the leadership capacity of the larger system.

Based on their review of the literature, York-Barr and Duke (2004) found that teacher leadership is an umbrella term that has different connotations for different stakeholders. For some, it carries forward ideas from the mid-1990s about site-based management and participatory leadership, which modify or expand existing hierarchical relationships in school settings. For others, teacher leadership is a term used to denote the specific

types of pedagogical decision-making that teachers alone engage in during the process of leading in their classrooms and in their roles within collegial school improvement efforts (Lieberman, 1995; Little, 2003). As a result, use of the term “teacher leadership” often muddies the waters when trying to envision new relationships and new ways of addressing the challenges associated with having all students achieve at high levels. Thus, in this study, we decided to disassociate the discourse regarding the leadership work that is required to increase student learning from the conventional roles in schools (teachers and administrators), and focus instead on clarifying the nature of the work itself. After articulating a clearer understanding of this form of leadership, we could better determine how to best allocate the functional responsibilities, and determine whether the work requires a re-examination of conventional roles.

For us, leadership with a focus on increased student learning involves processes and behaviors by which individuals influence other members of the professional community to improve teaching practices with the aim of increased learning and achievement for every student. We consider leadership focused on learning as joint work, to be performed collaboratively by all members of the professional community. This perspective is inclusive of both formal and informal leaders and is consistent with instructional (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2009; Blasé & Blasé, 2004), distributed (Spillane, 2006), and constructivist (Lambert et al. 2002) theories of school leadership. In addition to these more recent conceptualizations of leadership, we adopted Drago-Severson’s (2009) model of adult learning and Cuban’s (2001) distinction between dilemmas and technical problems as components for a loosely structured conceptual framework to guide our work. Using these cognitive tools, we explored the contexts and processes of adaptive learning, the ways in which it is understood by all members of the learning communities, and those learning experiences that foster adaptive learning for leaders in changing school contexts.

Establishing a Collaborative Research Study

This collaborative inquiry project is grounded in participatory action research methodology, which provided a framework that engaged both researchers and learning community participants in an active, democratic process of discourse and co-constructing knowledge. The primary goal of this forum was to facilitate every participant’s understanding of the characteristics of effective leadership in changing school environments and then using that knowledge to direct future action (McIntyre, 2008; McTaggart, 1991). Discourse within the communities was characterized by collaborative inquiry and open critical reflection about individual and group thinking related to leadership preparation and development. Participants and researchers actively and consciously create a learning community in order to become collaborators with the goal of creating new

knowledge based on the professional dialogue that emerges from the collaborative inquiry process.

This research project traces three learning communities whose members share multiple personal and professional connections: the university team of four faculty members from two departments, the university team and several leaders from the school district, and the university team and eight participating principals. The university team met at least once a month for three years from 2008–2011. The university team and Educational Service Agency personnel met once a month in 2009–2010. The university team and principals met once a month in 2010–2011. Field notes were actively maintained for each of the three learning communities. The university team met the most regularly in order to share and analyze these field notes, determine next steps and the agenda for the other two learning community meetings, and to engage in critical reflection about individual roles, contributions, understandings, and the direction, goals, and progress of the research project itself. These reflections soon became discussed in light of Drago-Severson's (2009) adult learning framework that identifies stages of adult learning in what she refers to as five levels of knowers: the instrumental knower, the socializing knower, the self-authoring knower, the early-self transforming knower, and the later self-transforming knower. According to Drago-Severson, these ways of knowing influence a leader's orientation to his or her role, the necessary supports for growth, and the challenges for his or her leadership. Our heightened self-reflective inquiry has been influenced by a shared desire to understand and improve upon the practices in which we participate and the situations in which we can influence others. In this way, we assumed learning and leading roles within our university team and engaged in multiple levels of participatory action research as it informed our thinking about preparing leaders for changing school environments.

An initial framing of tasks included identifying the responsibilities, processes, and practices required by pre-service and practicing teachers and school administrators to effectively lead for learning. The second task was to design a programmatic instructional preparation framework that incorporates the identified leadership knowledge domains, skills and practices. The final task was to develop a recommended structure and delivery system for the program that responds to the changing leadership needs in the field. As stated previously, our primary goal was to design an empirically sound program for developing future leaders. The second learning community emerged when university faculty and ESA leaders met to discuss and eventually propose a pilot seminar with current leaders in the field. In the spring of 2010, the university and ESA team decided to conduct a focus group to test the need for a different kind of seminar/program for leadership development. The focus group consisted of a representative group of principals and other school leaders from the county, and addressed the following questions:

- 1) What are the greatest challenges or problems you are currently dealing with in your school or district—the things you are confronting that don't seem to have any easy answers?
- 2) Is there a need for a group that meets once a month to think about and discuss how one might address these difficult problems that you are expected to solve—sort of a think tank for school leaders?
- 3) Would you be interested in being part of such a group? Would you have concerns about participating in such a group? Please describe.
- 4) What format would best fit the demands and schedule for a person in your role?
- 5) Would you need or desire some type of compensation for your participation? Would earning graduate credit or CEU's serve as an attractive option? If the ESA and/or university attached some high status designation to group membership, would that serve as an attractive option?

Based on the overwhelmingly positive responses to the proposal to create an alternative leadership seminar for current and prospective leaders and the specific concerns and issues shared by focus group participants, a pilot third learning community, the Leading for Learning Seminar, was created. The proposed purpose statement read:

This leadership seminar explores how to effectively lead adaptive work in educational environments. Adaptive work requires individuals and social systems to learn their way forward because resolution of a presenting problem is so complex or unique that it exceeds the limits of current technical knowledge.

After invitations were sent out to all of the 11 school districts that comprise the region served by the ESA and to the doctoral students at the university, eight building principals expressed interest in participating. Although the university team was open to the participation of leaders in any capacity, we later determined that holding the four-hour seminars on Friday mornings as recommended by the focus group made it difficult for those who did not have flexibility or control over their work schedules to participate.

A team comprised of the eight principals and four Eastern Michigan University faculty from the departments of Teacher Education and Educational Leadership created a professional learning community that met once a month for four hours, in order to:

- Identify and work to resolve vexing educational problems that practitioners confront in their schools or district.
- Engage in collaborate inquiry, and serve in reciprocal roles as consultants, mentors, and problem-solvers.
- Alternately work to solve an identified problem and then reflect on and unpack the work with their colleagues in the seminar.

- Increase capacity to utilize inquiry and reflection as tools for creative problem solving, which includes the ability to use boundary spanning and multiple perspectives to frame problematic situations and generate potential solutions.

We considered the pilot program as an excellent opportunity to test our developing theory of change related to leadership development and to better understand how practicing school principals engaged in adaptive learning through a dialogic and emergent learning environment as designed and modified by the university team. Rather than deliver a pre-established curriculum, we set out to co-create curriculum with educators in the field. Our goal was to discover the processes and practices associated with adaptive learning as it played out in actual schools and classrooms. The seminar was designed to study how school leaders deal with the toughest issues they faced, with an eye toward learning how they dealt with problems that seemed to defy technical solutions, and ultimately, to identify how to best prepare others to do this type of work. The context of how this seminar emerged became an important dimension for further understanding and analyzing the impact and outcomes of the year-long program.

Data analysis utilized pattern coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994), as well as the creation of concept maps, to capture the relationships among the key components under investigation. Our analysis leveraged the make-up of the research team by drawing on interdisciplinary constructs and theories to explain phenomena, with an eye toward improving practice. Our conclusions were validated by triangulating between data sources, by “member checking” conversations with various members of the learning communities, and by conducting an informal presentation of preliminary findings to a representative group of participating principals to confirm our understanding of phenomena and obtain feedback.

Data sources for this inquiry include field notes and artifacts related to each meeting of the learning communities and the pilot leadership seminar. Members of the research team recorded their own observations and reflections and these individual notes were then shared among team members for analysis. Data also include audio recordings of the final sessions of the university team meetings and the principal leadership seminar, and field notes from in depth semi-structured interviews with five of the eight principals who participated in the pilot leadership seminar.

Learning Within Our Monthly Seminars

The seminar group was comprised of principals with a range of leadership experiences from three districts. Two members had been in their principal roles for seven years, and three had recently stepped into the principalship in their current schools but had some level of leadership experience in prior positions. Three others were new to leading as a principal but had some experience as teacher leaders. One district is located in

a predominately white, homogeneous community that has a reputation as a safe, small town located outside of a “liberal university” community. The other two teams of leaders represented Title I districts whose population is shrinking, with a majority of students and families of color facing many challenges because of limited employment opportunities and community resource availability, and high family mobility. Four principals were white females, two were white males, one was an Asian male, and one was an African-American female. Among our university team, three members were white males and one was a white female. The two faculty members from the leadership department had many experiences as district and school administrators. The two teacher education faculty members had both been high school teachers, and now were assuming other leadership positions within the university setting.

Planning Together

Prior to each monthly seminar, the university team met to discuss the goals and plan the agenda in order to design each session with enough direction and flow coupled with room for input and co-construction by all participants. Working without either a pre-set curriculum or an a priori agenda was a point of regular negotiation among our university team, and challenged our assumptions about the technical aspects of creating a constructivist, emergent learning environment for the seminar. In addition, because we were each committed to understanding our own learning and development and consciously adapting Drago-Severson’s (2009) adult learning framework in our dialogue, our discourse patterns were openly self-reflective and critical about the ways that we typically would approach planning for instruction, leading others in professional learning and dialogue, and how we operated as a learning group. This discourse pattern is significant to note, as it created an active learning community among the university team that provided the stage for operationalizing similar communication patterns and expectations within the leadership seminar. Said more plainly, the faculty was learning together about how to collectively facilitate as a team, while modeling an open style of self-reflection, decision-making, and critical thinking. As a group of faculty, none of us had ever experienced such extensive teaching and leadership moments with an active peer and mentoring group.

As we worked to include the principals in helping us to plan the agendas, we were reminded of the very limited time available to leaders in school contexts for such thinking and feedback. The university team often did send out the rough agenda in advance of each seminar meeting; we made only a few modifications upon reviewing it during the opening of each session. Given that our seminar was both voluntary and not connected to any specific coursework or degree program, principals may not have considered the request for feedback or input as a high priority.

Learning Together

During the first meeting in September 2010, we opened the seminar by engaging principals in a text-based discussion about Cuban's (2001) monograph, "How Can I Fix It?" to explore the distinction between a problem and a dilemma. After providing some concrete scenarios and asking participants to categorize them as problems or dilemmas, we then presented Cuban's criteria for identifying a dilemma: (a) The situation should be important enough to devote a significant amount of time to it; (b) The situation should be complex enough to require fairly intense analysis to figure out what is going on; and (c) The situation should involve questions or decisions for which there are no easy answers or solutions.

Finally, after sharing an adaptation of Choo's (2006) matrix for analyzing modes of decision-making, participants were asked to locate our scenario examples in terms of their degree of goal ambiguity and technical uncertainty. We then connected this exploration to issues of the leaders' practice within their school environments, first with some journal writing and then with open sharing of very accessible examples. At the closing of this session, we asked participants to continue writing about a problematic situation they had identified and would be willing to share with others in the seminar. Principals often experienced some level of disagreement or cognitive dissonance when trying to define situations as technical problems or dilemmas of practice. In our university team's attempts to further push the discourse through an inquiry process, it became evident that while leaders' contexts for leading had some distinctive dimensions, their own learning journeys were intimately connected to their ability to critically reflect on their personal goals, aims, motivations, experiences, assumptions about others, systems, and change. Where we initially thought the demographics of the schools and districts might be the salient variable influencing one's approach to leadership, it soon became apparent that the problematic situations the principals identified in these different contexts shared many similarities and provided common ground for dialogue among participants.

At the start of the second session, one faculty member shared what he had identified as a personal and professional dilemma in order to model the process of critical self-reflection, learning, and analysis while building a deeper understanding of the distinction between technical problems and dilemmas. Gary shared an in-depth written critical reflection that captured a dilemma and asked participants to discuss the related issues and how they might react. When concluding his self-reflection on his own actions, he stated, "I didn't realize how much my own beliefs entered into my decision-making until much later." In this way, Gary established a stage of vulnerability about his learning to lead with the seminar group. During the next several seminars, participants were asked to identify and share their own dilemmas of practice with the group with some significant level

of depth and detail. We encouraged each principal to construct a coherent narrative that would capture what was problematic and how he or she was attempting to resolve the situation.

During the October and November seminars, individual principals shared their dilemmas and then each participant privately considered two questions: What is it that I don't know about the situation? What perspectives could give me a deeper understanding of the situation? Following this period of reflection, participants were asked to pose 2-3 questions to the presenter. In this way, the university team was encouraging an open but critical collaborative inquiry process for thinking about one's current understandings and assumptions while actively working to adapt a constructivist framework for knowledge-building. Several principals' dilemmas related to learning how best to communicate with individuals and the larger staff in their buildings while adhering to policies and personal beliefs about the need to disclose and share information. Other principals were struggling with issues like how best to communicate with families during crisis situations that emerged and escalated quickly, how to avoid being overly maternal/paternal or dogmatic, how to negotiate with union representatives while implementing a district mandate, how to acknowledge the history of a building and staff without being paralyzed by prior dysfunctional patterns of behavior or personality roadblocks, how to handle lowering student enrollments and maintain high expectations for student behavior, and how to create an environment that is psychologically safe for everyone in the school. Further, some principals raised questions, including, "How do I know if I am competent? What is my role as the leader of this school? How much of this leading is about my own personal journey as a learner?" As a group, participants' discussion of their leadership dilemmas disclosed a tension between the need to manage and a desire to lead. While participants often shared instances of their own learning trajectories as leaders, little was shared about teachers' or students' learning or achievement.

During the seminars, principals noted influential texts and workshop experiences in the spirit of mentoring and supporting other participants. As a result, the university team had access to those emergent knowledge and skills principals cited as most likely to support and improve their performance. Participants shared readings of such texts as Pink's (1995) *A Whole New Mind* and (2005) *Drive*, Connelly's *Peak: How Great Companies get Their Mojo from Maslow* (2007) and Danielson's (1996) *Framework for Excellence in Teaching*. They discussed wanting to progress in their skills in communicating with diverse stakeholders, citing families and teachers most often. They also wanted further support and mentoring in navigating personally held values and principals while leading in dynamic, social organizations. Leaders noted that these kinds of texts and skills were not like those about which they learned during any leadership preparation course, but were useful since they captured some familiar dilemmas and prompted participants to think creatively about them.

As principals shared their dilemmas, the differences that emerged between men and women became a point for critical self-reflection. The influence of gendered ways of knowing and being (Belenky & Goldberger, 1987) became evident in the emergent issues as well as in the ways that individuals understood both their and others' dilemmas. A few female leaders introduced the use of "True Colors" as a means for identifying personality constructs and used this as a tool for personalizing connecting with other women in the group and the female university faculty member. The use of this personality matrix was then referred to when dilemmas were introduced and reflected upon. Several of the male and female leaders introduced the challenges of leading others who were mostly female and actively working against assuming a dysfunctional matriarchal or patriarchal relationship in the process. Differences in race were noted among the student populations but did not become a point of examination and reflection among the participant leaders. Race and gender were regularly discussed among the university team during planning and reflection sessions that occurred prior to each seminar.

During the December and January sessions, we began introducing Drago-Severson's (2009) work and assigned some reading that provided an overview of the adult learning framework. In January, Jim provided a PowerPoint presentation about professional growth that explained Walter and Marks' (1981) experiential learning cycle. This move was the university team's attempt to provide additional curriculum to our seminar in order to frame previous discussions and locate individual professional growth on a continuum that grounds other thinking about leadership preparation. These two sessions led to principals further reflecting on their dilemmas in terms of their own development as learners.

Because of challenges with negotiating four distinctive Winter Break schedules, we were unable to meet in February. By March, the university team explored how the principals envisioned leading professional development in each respective school, given their own learning trajectory and in light of our discussions about adult learning and the experiential learning cycle. The university team conducted semi-structured interviews with the principals to inquire about how their participation in the seminar supported current ways of knowing, and challenged them to continue development toward a reflectively transformative state. We also asked principals to estimate what percentage of their staff were instrumental, socializing, self-authoring, and self-transforming knowers and explore the degree to which the professional learning plan for the school provided developmentally appropriate supports and challenges that were the different ways of knowing that were represented among the teaching staff. Principals were asked for suggestions for making changes that were university-based and school-based. Finally, principals were asked about recommendations for changes to make professional learning and leadership development more consistent with adult growth and developmental theory.

Reflecting Together

During our last seminar in April, we shared our analytical synthesis of what we had learned as a result of our seminars and interviews with the principals and asked for feedback, verification, and additional commentary about what was learned by members of the group.

What was Learned about Leading for Learning

Our analysis disclosed that the Leading for Learning seminar design successfully created a structured interpretive community for participants with these enabling characteristics: a safe environment, participant connectedness and mutual trust, commonalities of concerns with similar issues in varied contexts, and an emphasis on practical application and “owned” problems or dilemmas of professional practice. We noted that the interpretive process used by principals to address these dilemmas involved information gathering and problem-solving through the sharing of craft knowledge about what worked for them as leaders in similar situations. The seminar created a space for perspective-taking and challenging assumptions about leadership practice using a highly critical reflective inquiry process. Principals reported affirmation of their leadership practice as a significant outcome associated with participation in the seminar. They also indicated that the seminar enabled them to learn how to be a better leader while struggling to deal with responsibilities and expectations of the job.

In our efforts to maintain a co-constructed learning community, the university team did not intentionally introduce “leading for learning” as a focus for any particular seminar session. It was the shared belief of the university team that we should allow each principal to present what he or she identified as a dilemma of leadership practice for consideration by the group and allow issues related to learning to emerge naturally. It was noteworthy that issues relevant to student learning were not presenting problems for these principals. Instead, the dilemmas they shared were generally concerned with how to balance their personal leadership vision with expectations of others (both superiors and subordinates), given the reality of what was plausible in the political and social context of their own school or district. Therefore, political or socio-psychological frameworks were more helpful in guiding an adaptive learning process for these principals than the Drago-Severson developmental learning model that was adopted by the university team as a theoretical basis for our discourse and ultimate design of the seminar. At the end of the seminar, it became clear to the university team that although we had successfully created a safe, coveted space for critical reflection by participants, interactions within the learning community over one academic year had not been sufficient to fully move principals from one adult developmental stage to the next.

Our analysis of the pilot leadership seminar experience support-

ed three major conclusions. First was the fact that adult development is a complex process that takes time; it took longer to develop the enabling conditions for meaningful discourse in the seminar than we had anticipated. Second, the seminar setting and design provided a better context for facilitating adult leadership development than our traditional university classes or other professional development opportunities offered by the ESA. Third, adult developmental theory may not be an appropriate model for designing programs to support leaders who work in turbulent or catastrophic environments.

Contributions to the Field and Our Next Steps

This ongoing research project contributes to a better understanding of the nature of leadership required to effectively prepare and support leaders to adapt and learn in the frame of emerging school contexts. A proposed conjecture is that the current developmental stage of the adult leader has a tremendous influence on how he or she defines challenges and engages in adaptive learning, and affects his and her ability to help other adults develop as leaders. This study has identified the following key areas for further research:

- 1) How do formal and informal leaders at different developmental levels identify, make sense of, and respond to adaptive challenges associated with the press for school reform?
- 2) Does ensuring every student learns at high levels ever emerge as an issue?
- 3) How and to what degree does the environmental context affect these leaders' perceptions of adaptive challenges?
- 4) Given the complexity and uncertainty of leading in rapidly changing school environments, how do university faculty and ESA providers modify their leadership professional development designs to increase capacity for adaptive learning?

Because of the very positive feedback and evaluations we received about the value of this pilot seminar, we have been invited to work with another group of leaders within a collaborative partnership with the county-wide educational service agency and will focus on those emergent questions and issues.

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