

Keeping Our Eyes on the Prize: The Role of Fieldwork in Preparing Social Justice School Leaders in a Public University Program

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Abstract

This article provides a discussion of how fieldwork can enhance the preparation of school leaders, and how this emphasis on practical, experiential learning can expose students to the wide array of challenges facing public schools. We discuss ways to transform traditional and procedural fieldwork objectives of our students to those that address social justice leadership.

Keywords: *leadership preparation, fieldwork, social justice leadership*

A significant goal of public education is to maintain a “common good,” that is, to provide a resource available to all, one that empowers and enables individuals to craft a quality of life that they see appropriate. This belief that the goal of public education is to improve the lives of all students and families lies, in our view, at the core of common good. School leaders have been traditionally prepared through public university-sponsored programs. This paper discusses how leadership programs can maintain a focus on the broader role of education through empowering fieldwork experiences. Data for this discussion were drawn from educational leadership candidates in a public university that has worked to couple theory and practice in preparing future school leaders guided by social justice epistemologies.

The Primacy of School Leadership

There is strong consensus from the field that school leaders are a critical factor in the success or failure of a school, and that these

individuals make a significant impact on student performance (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). Moreover, the knowledge base confirms that in terms of *within-school* factors related to student achievement, school leadership quality is second only to the effects of the quality of curriculum and teacher instruction (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). As a result, it is critical to understand best practices for school leader preparation and to explore the variety of ways that school leaders are acculturated. Leadership preparation becomes more important with the knowledge that schools with low student achievement are often led by under-prepared leaders (Béteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2012; Horng, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2009). Further, low-income students, students of color, and low-performing students are more likely to attend schools led by novice or temporary principals, those who do not hold an advanced (master's) degree and those who have attended "less selective" colleges (Loeb, Kalogrides, & Horng, 2010). Thus, how to improve the quality of leaders who can successfully lead under-performing schools is a pressing issue for all leadership preparation programs.

The Fieldwork Experience

Most educational administration programs require some form of practical experience for candidates pursuing licensure as an administrator, and this practical experience is typically an extension of a certain period of time of professional work experience. The demonstration of abilities and knowledge is critical for those studying to become educational administrators, and this demonstration is often rooted in the concept of experiential learning. Experiential learning is a process of teaching and learning where students experience in real world situations the problems, processes, and opportunities they will face once they are in permanent positions. Experiential learning is noted as being difficult to assess, although the rise in the use of portfolios has become more common and allows for the presentation of artifacts that illustrate student work. Additionally, experiential learning often requires a knowledgeable individual to have some oversight or mentoring of the student; someone at the worksite who can assess and give feedback as different scenarios arise. This can

mean that either the institution uses core faculty members to do this supervision or must rely on clinical or adjunct faculty or on-site supervisors.

Although there is considerable literature on the fieldwork experience in teacher and administrator preparation, programs have been critiqued for their lack of attention to students' on-site experiences (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007; Barton & Cox, 2012). To explore the fieldwork component of our program, a public institution representative of many in the U.S., we examined fieldwork objectives from 31 current and former students' portfolios. Our intention was a form of "self-study" whereby we would gather information about the fieldwork experience and propose recommendations to our program.

Fieldwork objectives are developed using a variety of resources. Upon entrance into the program our students complete a self-assessment on leadership that helps them develop fieldwork goals and objectives. Additionally, the fieldwork goals and objectives are developed to meet licensure requirements such as the California Administrator Performance Expectations (CAPEs). Students are supported by fieldwork advisors in developing goals and objectives grounded in the daily routines found in a school or district, with the intent to give students experiential learning experiences. Moreover, because our program emphasizes a social justice leadership approach, we expect that the fieldwork objectives of our candidates address issues of social justice leadership.

In the next section we provide a synthesis of candidates' fieldwork portfolios. We present examples of the fieldwork objectives and discuss ways that we might have better supported students in broadening their view of leadership towards advocacy and social justice perspectives.

Instructional leadership. Many of our candidates included fieldwork objectives related to instructional leadership in their portfolios. Specific fieldwork objectives included.

- *Conduct a walkthrough with an elementary school principal*
- *Learn all of the different sub-groups represented in student data*
- *Conduct a walkthrough with a school principal at a school that is*

at least 20% ethnically different than my own

While these fieldwork objectives address areas related to instructional leadership, we wondered how we might have supported our students to think critically about instructional leadership in their school's local context. Many of the students will lead schools with large numbers of English Language learners, and come from homes with a diverse cultural heritage. They will need to have extensive knowledge about effective pedagogical approaches to leadership in schools with English Learners, as well as understand cultural differences in family support of education. This confirms the idea that instructional leadership is optimized when leaders understand and are responsive to the context of their schools (Leithwood, Harris, Hopkins, 2008). A recommendation to our program may be to discuss ways that advisors can support students to develop fieldwork objectives that reflect a pedagogical approach that takes into account the culture and context of leading schools with English Learners.

Systems leadership. Fieldwork objectives related to “systems leadership” were included in the portfolios through topics such as school law, staff handbooks, federal, state, and local requirements and regulations. Examples included,

- *Research the rates of school discipline and suspensions at my school*
- *Review the Staff Handbook*
- *Attend a School Board meeting*

Many of the fieldwork objectives reviewed in this section were traditional and procedural in nature. Students' most likely developed them by following the CAPE standards, results from their self-assessment and/or suggestions from their fieldwork advisors. Missing from these objectives was attention to social justice perspectives. A recommendation to our program is to consider ways to support students to transform traditional fieldwork objectives into those that reflect a social justice leadership approach. For example, fieldwork advisors can support leadership candidates in interrogating the opportunity structures and systems in schools that do or do not promote a positive culture and climate for students and staff.

Professional learning and growth leadership. The fieldwork objectives in this area addressed topics such as building

professional learning communities and planning professional development. Examples included,

- *Assess school Professional Learning Community (PLC) needs*

These objectives could be strengthened with attention to effective professional development for teachers of students of color and/or ability. The student might be asked to review the ethnicity of teachers, administrators and students, as well as to explore disability accommodations and the physical school facility for disability access.

Visionary Leadership. Although students included visionary leadership in their portfolio, the fieldwork objectives did not address how to *implement* a vision. This omission may reflect the difficulty of leadership students to make the transition from a teacher-centered perspective to a school leader-centered perspective. For example,

- *Shadowing a school principal*
- *Help implement the school vision*

Creating a vision is one of the most difficult tasks an educational leader can undertake, and focusing on interactions following a shadowing episode can optimize the simple act of silently following a principal or an assistant principal. Particular attention can be focused on the process of interactions with constituents such as parents, district personnel, teachers, other administrators, and students.

School improvement leadership. Another part of the fieldwork portfolio that we examined focused on school improvement efforts and accreditation, as in the following,

- *To learn about a school's Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) review process*
- *To facilitate the WASC Focus Group Meetings and encourage participation of focus group members in the creation of the WASC report.*

The fieldwork objectives in this section did not address the larger issue of school improvement and the role of the school leader. Particular attention to these fieldwork experiences should be directed at understanding the larger meaning of accreditation and trying to understand the overall process, while simultaneously becoming familiar with how others have faced the challenges of assessment and reporting. Mendoza-Reis and Flores (2014) remind us that school

improvement at the institutional level requires school leaders to “engage in an advocacy leadership that challenges the existing status quo and the role that schools play in maintaining a system of disproportionate school failure among non-dominant students, and in particular, English learners. When school leaders recognize the system of inequality, they are better able to support their staff in addressing the inequalities through a responsive pedagogy. School leaders must be prepared to examine and interrupt all school and district policies that lead to institutional inequities” (p. 195).

Community leadership. The last category was Community Leadership. Included in these fieldwork objectives were,

- *To have a better understanding of the different roles parents can have within the school environment*
- *Become a representative on the English Learners Advisory Committee.*

An interesting observation was that it was the students who teach in high-poverty schools who tended to include fieldwork objectives about community leadership. In our leadership classes, students are required to read articles on different ways of thinking about the home/school connection and trying to understand different cultural heritages and values that impact both the student and the family. They are introduced to the *funds of knowledge* research, and are challenged to reflect how their actions as a leader set a tone for the acceptance of all learners. A recommendation to our program may be to require that students discuss multiple ways that community can be defined, both within the school and within the school district.

Discussion and Recommendations

In this program, candidates are taught about systemic inequities and the ways that school leaders can address them. Candidates are taught to ‘guide their actions from an explicit and solid equity agenda (Arriaza & Mendoza-Reis, 2006). This was reflected in the fieldwork objectives that included increasing awareness about diverse students at their schools (ethnicity, poverty and/or special education) and interrogating inequitable systems such as analyzing the rates of retention, discipline and suspensions or finding ways to increase parental involvement in both curriculum and school governance. It was noted, however, that most of these types of fieldwork objectives

were from candidates who taught in less affluent schools. The fieldwork objectives from the candidates who taught in highly affluent schools tended to focus on learning policies and procedures in managing schools. While these are important, candidates will be better prepared if their fieldwork objectives are focused on analyzing policies and procedures through the lens of social justice leadership.

There were a high number of fieldwork objectives in the category of Instructional Leadership. One might say this is to be expected, as our candidates tend to be teacher leaders with extensive knowledge about teaching and learning. Nonetheless, in closer analysis, very few mentioned teaching and learning in the context of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Our program, as well as others, must consider monitoring and mediating fieldwork objectives as necessary to ensure that our candidates are prepared to be social justice leaders.

The purpose of this discussion was not only to highlight one institution's use of fieldwork objectives, but also to provide some reflection on these objectives as students consider where to enroll in degree programs and what they might look for in terms of experiences. As private educational competitors become increasingly common, it is important for students, and for employers of these students, to consider the experiential elements of what students are learning, and not simply whether they have completed a credential. Increasingly, the content of degrees and educational programs needs to be the focus of employment rather than focusing on the "faster and quicker" mentality that has secured a stronghold among the mindset of so many learners today.

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