

Interdisciplinary School Leadership Development for Pre-Service Graduate Students

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Schools need leaders who are prepared to address the complex challenges of the current educational landscape. Questions remain, however, as to the best way to support the development of leaders across disciplines. As graduate educators training new principals, school psychologists and school counselors, a strength afforded is the opportunity to explore the value of shared leadership at the pre-service level. This paper presents a piloted model of interdisciplinary training of graduate students in education to be leaders and change agents committed to culturally responsive positive outcomes in addressing challenging student behavior. The roles and functions of each specific discipline were explored, frames of viewing discipline unpacked and skill development in communicating around emotionally challenging topics provided.

Fullan (2001) differentiates between information and knowledge. He suggests that information is that found on paper and in computers, while knowledge is in people. As a graduate department producing new principals, school psychologists and school counselors we believe that our strength is in supporting the development of individuals who will utilize their ongoing and reflective quest for knowledge within their communities of practice to enable positive change in schools. This paper presents a model of interdisciplinary training of pre-service graduate students with the underlying core objective of preparing leaders and change agents committed to culturally responsive, effective school based practice.

Leithwood and Riehl (2005) suggest that the key functions of leadership can be found in two areas: providing direction and exerting influence. As graduate educators committed to producing leaders in our respective fields, the question emerges as to how to best support the development of leaders to assist in their ability to provide direction and influence. In regard to the former, effective communication is essential to leading change. Pre-service professionals are often trained within their own discipline and thus become well versed in communicating with those with like knowledge, skills and perspective. However, in schools, effective cross-disciplinary communication is challenging, and can be laced with apprehension. Barth (2002) reminds us that a critical and difficult undertaking for all school leaders invested in changing a culture is acknowledging and addressing what he describes as non-discussables:

[S]ubjects sufficiently important that they are talked about frequently but are so laden with anxiety and fearfulness that these conversations take place only in the parking lot, the rest rooms, the playground, the car pool, or the dinner table at home.” (p. 6)

Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, Switzler, and Covey (2002) describe addressing these leadership issues as “crucial conversations,” those conversations that occur

when stakes are high, opinions vary and strong emotions are present. Knowing how and when to engage in crucial conversations is important in educational leadership, school psychology and school counseling. Shared educational expectations and graduate student collaboration centered on using crucial conversations in the school system to influence positive change provides practical application of this essential skill.

Inter-disciplinary collaboration is another important avenue to model best practice reflective of school-based practice. Most schools practice site based decision making reliant on input from various professionals in the school. Interdisciplinary teams are needed in order for the education not to be fragmented. A greater understanding of other professions increases the likelihood of most effectively utilizing collaborative partnerships and providing more comprehensive supports for students and families (Winitzky, Sheridan, Crow, Welch, & Kennedy, 1995). Professional standards for training and practice serve to provide a discipline with criteria for training and best practice. They define the knowledge-base and skill-sets of professionals in a given field. Knowledge of how the professional roles, expectations and standards are similar and unique across disciplines can help pre-service training programs formulate classes and support field experiences that utilize interdisciplinary collaboration.

Successful school based practice relies on collaboration. As schools are diverse and ever changing systems, cooperation, communication and collaboration are essential to the system’s growth and viability. It has been suggested that in such systems, true leadership can be measured by one’s ability to have influence (Maxwell, 2005). Reflection on the development of the leadership capacity to influence suggests that all our students could benefit at the pre-service level from collaboration with other school based professionals who would play various leadership roles in the schools. In

order to do so, a pilot project was developed. An underlying assumption grounding the project is that school culture is, in part, comprised of the beliefs shared by education professionals, including principals, school counselors and school psychologists. This project examines beliefs of pre-service graduate students in School Counseling, Educational Leadership and School Psychology regarding the roles and functions of each specific discipline in addressing challenging student behavior. This process utilized “crucial conversations” (Patterson et al., 2002) to unpack underlying assumptions of school discipline systems and their responsiveness to students with different emotional and behavioral needs. The impact of interdisciplinary collaboration on graduate student development was examined through theoretical discussion, experiential learning and case based training.

Development of the Course

The importance of interdisciplinary collaboration was a topic often discussed within our department which consists of three programs, Educational Leadership, Counseling (including Agency and School Counseling) and School Psychology. Indeed our departmental mission statement includes the following:

[T]he mission . . . is to prepare students who positively impact the lives of and opportunities for individuals, families, schools and communities. Through interdisciplinary collaboration, community partnerships and excellence in teaching and scholarship, the . . . faculty foster the development of reflective practitioners. (Department of Counseling, Educational Leadership and School Psychology, RIC, 2010)

The commitment to interdisciplinary collaboration was strengthened by conversations that impressed upon the faculty the presence of many cross-disciplinary similarities. These similarities included what was being taught, skills needed to be successful in the schools, values instilled in the education professionals and needs of our graduate students. The interdisciplinary collaboration began quite informally, with collegial conversations becoming more targeted. This led to visits to each other’s classes and beginning research collaboration. The question remained how to more formally enact our commitment to interdisciplinary collaboration within our department.

In Spring 2010, an interdisciplinary course experience for practicum level students in School Counseling, School Psychology and Education Leadership was developed. This course, Interdisciplinary School Leadership Development,

examined the roles and functions of each specific discipline in addressing challenging student behavior. Applying the underlying assumption that school culture is comprised of shared beliefs to school discipline systems, we hypothesized that we could impact responsiveness to students with different emotional and behavioral needs by enhancing the skill development of interdisciplinary players. In this way we intend for aspiring school professionals to mitigate potential negative outcomes for these vulnerable students by challenging the assumptions that in turn shape the culture. This goal is consistent with our departmental mission, while addressing a topic of high interest and essential skill-based need for our students across disciplines.

The impact of interdisciplinary collaboration on graduate student development was examined through theoretical discussion, experiential learning, and case-based training. The text, *Lost at School: Why Our Kids with Behavioral Challenges are Falling Through the Cracks and How We Can Help Them* (Greene, 2008), was used to explain how the Collaborative Problem Solving Approach reestablishes learning opportunities for, arguably, the students most vulnerable to failure in school, those with significant emotional and behavioral concerns. The text *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking when the Stakes are High* (Patterson et al., 2002) was used to provide a skill-building framework for enhancing communication around difficult, emotionally charged topics.

The course consisted of three seminar sessions that students across the three disciplines attended together. Session 1 covered the topics of Introduction to Leadership Styles and Increasing Knowledge Across Disciplines (including Educational Leadership, School Counseling and School Psychology). The content was framed around the following questions:

- How does self-knowledge of professional identity impact responsibilities and perceived role in the field?
- How does enhanced understanding of the roles and responsibilities of other educational disciplines impact own functioning and potential collaboration?

The premise explored was that effective shared leadership is promoted by increasing knowledge and understanding across professional educational roles.

The second session utilized Greene’s (2008) text. The content included an introduction to Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) and exploration of how it would impact their school setting. Framing questions included:

- How does taking a developmental perspective shift understanding of behavioral concerns?

- How does viewing behavior problems as skill deficits impact disciplinary process?
- How do both of the above change one's view of the child or adolescent?

This session exposed students to a process used to address challenging behavior through a frame that considers the child's development and skills in managing stressful situations in school. The impact of one's view of challenging behavior and theory of discipline on decision making in the schools as well as on school culture was explored.

The third session used the process of Crucial Conversations (Patterson et al., 2002) to complete a case based group experience. The case was a hypothetical meeting regarding a student with discipline referral with various roles assigned within the group (i.e., caregiver, principal, school counselor, school psychologist). Questions addressed in the case discussion included:

- How will varying perspectives of student discipline be discussed within school context?
- How can school professionals advocate for alternate ways of responding to kids who lack the skills to manage successfully in school?

During this third session, students enacted crucial conversation during the hypothetical meeting, articulated their process and reflected on shared pool of meaning created. The roles throughout the process and outcomes varied by group but served well to demonstrate how enhanced communication skills can facilitate culture change by unpacking underlying assumptions and beliefs held by school professionals.

Outcomes

The course served to engage dialogue around the concept of shared leadership in the schools. At the pre-service graduate level, there is interest and motivation to participate in cross-disciplinary training. Student feedback was very positive in terms of the opportunity to learn more about other school based professional training, roles and perspectives. There was also positive response in terms of understanding and empathizing with how roles impact perspectives in problem solving. Students also reported appreciating the opportunity to build relationships with graduate students outside their discipline and network in terms of placements for training and future employment.

Feedback from the students supported that there was a high level of buy in for Greene's (2008) Collaborative Problem Solving model. There was expressed desire for additional training in this area. The majority of students endorsed advocating for a shift in

how schools view discipline and how reactive responses to challenging behavior are in many school settings. There was a strong recognition of need for teachers to be included in this "conversation". There was an expressed desire to include teachers in this pre-service graduate training experience.

Another important outcome was the perception that increased understanding of roles raised awareness of potential contributions in service of overlapping interest (particularly in area of discipline). That is to say, with increased knowledge, students began conceptualizing how others in their school community could be utilized in various situations. It opened up creative thinking in terms of using personnel to their fullest potential. Many students commented that they were surprised by the range of competencies the various professionals could offer.

Implications

To more fully understand the conceptual foundations of this project it is necessary to examine the intellectual foundations of the disciplines from which the participants come. Although distinct, each of the disciplines represented in this project shared significant overlap with the others in terms of core mission as defined and represented in the professional standards. A closer look reveals that, in fact, areas of shared concern outweigh those that are proprietary to any specific profession. Indeed, we found that this did not serve to diminish the unique contributions of educational professionals from each of these disciplines. Rather, by promoting shared understanding of the training, perspective, and potential for collaboration among these graduate student groups, there was the opportunity for better understanding of their own role as well as how it fits within the broader school community. We believe this can prepare them upon graduation to enter into their respective professions with an understanding of shared leadership practices that build upon a common core and also leverage the unique capacities and potential contributions of each member.

To illustrate this, we offer an overview and crosswalk of the professional standards to which school principals, school psychologists and school counselors align their practice. The principal is the school leader who is held accountable for the overall performance of the institution. While each profession represented in the school building is accountable for their own area of professional practice, it is reasonable to expect that their work be linked to the outcomes associated with overall school performance. The professional standards for school principals as described by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) suggest there are six core areas of focus for school leaders.

These include mission and vision, teaching and learning, management of the learning environment, external collaborations and partnerships, ethics and integrity, and understanding of the greater context (ISLLC, 2008). It is instructive to note that the evolution of these leadership standards in practice has evolved from “administrative leaders will . . .”, to “educational leaders will . . .”, thus denoting a shift to distributed leadership influenced by the nominal school head. Within this framework we may examine work identifying the commonalities and unique competencies among school psychologists and school counselors in terms of professional standards. Dowd-Eagle, Darcy, & Eagle (2010) note that each of these professions shares the compatible foundation areas of human development, enhancing student learning, design, implementation, and evaluation of school-based programs, programming for academic, personal/social, and behavioral health development, and home-school partnerships. More specifically, the National Association of School Psychology (NASP) professional standards include the following ten domains: (1) data-based decision making and accountability; (2) consultation and collaboration; (3) interventions and instructional support to develop academic skills; (4) interventions and mental health services to develop social and life skills; (5) school-wide practices to promote learning; (6) preventive and responsive services; (7) family-school collaboration services; (8) diversity in development and learning; (9) research and program evaluation; (10) legal, ethical, and professional practice (NASP, 2010). Turning to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model we see a model of professional practice bounded by the themes, skills, and attitudes of leadership, advocacy, collaboration and teaming, and systemic change all in the service of promoting the academic, career, and personal/social development of all students (Darcy, Dukes, Squier, & Greco, 2010). As demonstrated in Table 1, these common foundation areas align and overlap significantly with the ISLLC standards outlined above. What’s more, the professions of both school counseling and school psychology have clearly delineated codes of ethics and expectations for professionalism and integrity in practice. The resulting picture reveals school-based professionals from disparate disciplines who share much in common in terms of core ideals and professional mission.

While commonalities enhance collaboration, also valuable are the contributions that are made based upon the expertise developed through specialized training within each discipline. For example, school psychology graduate students receive specialized training in assessment of academic, social, emotional and behavioral functioning at the individual, classroom and school wide level. School psychologists often work

closely with students who are served in special education to ensure access to a full range of educational experiences. School counselors have both developmental and clinical expertise that is applied in their work with individual students, small groups, and via classroom guidance activities. They are also uniquely prepared to attend to system-wide program development utilizing skills associated with consultation, collaboration, and advocacy practices in the service of helping all students to develop and achieve academically. Principals, no longer viewed as mere building managers, articulate a moral purpose, oversee curriculum and instruction, attend to the position of the school in relation to external demands and constituents, and facilitate shared leadership. As such, each has unique contributions to make to interdisciplinary, collaborative leadership teams dedicated to promoting and enhancing the academic success of all students.

Specific to the issue of school discipline, the unique contributions of students from each represented program were also evident. For example, in the final session role-play aspiring principals contributed logistical and policy-level perspectives. School psychology students were able to highlight the interpretation of behavioral evidence from a strengths-based perspective. Finally, aspiring school counselors displayed advocacy and collaboration skills while attending to the diverse needs of meeting participants. This is not to say that each participant is limited by their prescribed roles, rather the role and competency emerged by profession and enhanced the shared pool of meaning.

Benefits to Graduate Students

This project was born of the belief that as graduate educators it is incumbent upon us to fully prepare our students for the roles they will assume upon program completion. If we expect our graduates to actively participate in school leadership within the parameters of their expertise, then it is logical to provide pre-service learning experiences designed to prepare them for that role. This seminar began with facilitating shared understanding of the professional standards, roles and functions of the pre-service professionals represented in the authors’ academic department. Through focused activities centered on a common area of interest and practice, namely, school discipline, graduate students were afforded the opportunity to collaborate in a case study scenario with the goal of enhancing understanding and appreciation of one another’s approach and potential contributions to practical areas of concern. It is anticipated that the inclusion of this kind of activity at the level of graduate preparation will enhance the speed and effectiveness with which our

Table 1
Professional Standards Crosswalk

Focus Area	ISLLC Standard	NASP Standard	ASCA Standard
Mission & Vision	1. Setting a widely shared vision for learning	2.5 School-wide practices to promote learning	Standard 2 The professional school counselor advocates for equitable opportunities for every student.
Teaching & Learning	2. Developing a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth	2.1 Data-based decision making and accountability 2.2 Consultation and collaboration 2.3 Interventions and instructional support to develop academic skills	Standard 1 The professional school counselor promotes the academic, career, and personal/social development of every student.
Management of the Learning Environment	3. Ensuring effective management of the organization, operation, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment	2.4 Interventions and mental health services to develop social and life skills 2.6 Preventive and responsive services	Standard 3 The professional school counselor assumes a leadership role within the school community.
External Collaborations and Partnerships	4. Collaborating with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources	2.7 Family-school collaboration services 2.9 Research and program evaluation	Standard 4 The professional school counselor collaborates to support the success of all students
Ethics & Integrity	5. Acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner	2.10 Legal, ethical, and professional practice	ASCA Code of Ethics
Understanding the Greater Context	6. Understanding, responding to, and influencing the political, social, legal, and cultural context	2.8 Diversity in development and learning	

graduates will be able to join and participate on interdisciplinary school leadership teams.

Future Directions

This pilot represents an initial effort to incorporate practical, interdisciplinary training at the pre-service level for aspiring education professionals. Next steps include curriculum refinements based on student feedback and instructor observations. Formal evaluation of student outcomes following participation in the Interdisciplinary School Leadership Development Seminar in the coming academic year is also planned. The expectation is that this seminar will become an integral component of each of the three graduate programs currently participating. In addition, exploratory conversations have begun with departmental representatives from other potentially viable participants in the seminar. These include, not surprisingly, faculty members in the areas of teacher preparation and special education. In time, it may be that within the seminar we are able to incorporate a full

replication of the kind of interdisciplinary collaboration to which we exhort our graduate students when they leave our programs. In doing so we are able to model our mission for our students and build needed skills desired across disciplines, while reaping the benefits of interdisciplinary sharing.

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