

PERCEPTIONS WITHIN THE DISCIPLINE: EXCEPTIONAL SCHOLARSHIP IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND ADMINISTRATION*

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Abstract

This preliminary study asked, “Who’s the most exceptional living scholar in educational leadership?” Four scholar-practitioners were nominated. The reasons nominators gave for their selections were analyzed. The criteria—significant and broad impact on scholarship, national spheres of public influence, and mentoring and multi-authoring systems—are included along with contextual issues.



NOTE: This module has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of the Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a scholarly contribution to the knowledge base in educational administration.

This preliminary study asked, “Who’s the most exceptional living scholar in the field of educational leadership?” Four scholar-practitioners who were the most frequently nominated by fellow academics from 2002 to 2003 were identified. The reasons given by nominators for their selections were analyzed, resulting in criteria that can be used for characterizing exceptional scholarship at this time or pursuing a more comprehensive study. The criteria—significant and broad impact on scholarship and the field, national spheres of public influence, and mentoring and multi-authoring systems—appear in table form, complete with representative quotes. Importantly, issues of context and tension are raised as different perspectives were offered on the survey question itself from both voting and non-voting respondents.

On the one hand, a survey respondent commented,

I realize the impossible task of selecting the greatest living scholar in our field.

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Some are naturalistic methodologists rather than mainstream educational administration scholars, while others approach scholarship with very narrow or very broad perspectives.

On the other hand, another declared,

Some scholars do stand out. There is one who I think is simply the greatest “mover ‘n’ shaker” in the profession. This individual has done more than any to shape the direction of the field—his work is widely read by both scholars and practitioners, and his contributions to educational leadership are widely recognized.

Introduction

For this study, academics in educational leadership and administration were asked, “Who’s the most exceptional living scholar in the field of educational leadership?” The respondents (university faculty constituents) were encouraged to provide an explanation for their votes. The focus here is on the perceptions of nominators relative to outstanding scholarship in educational leadership. Not only the “who,” but particularly the “why,” served as the guiding framework for this analysis. Throughout this survey research spanning 2002 to 2003, four scholar-practitioners in particular were most frequently nominated, leading to their eventual identification. The reasons given by nominators for their selections were analyzed, resulting in criteria that are discussed here; these can be used for characterizing exceptional scholarship at this time or pursuing a more comprehensive study. The criteria—significant and broad impact on scholarship and the field, national spheres of public influence, and mentoring and multi-authoring systems—appear in Table 1, complete with representative quotes from the data.

Importantly, issues of context and tension were raised as different perspectives were offered on the survey question itself from both voting and non-voting respondents. The tension evident in the opening quotes signifies deep, unresolved issues that surfaced during the data analysis. The complexities of this picture are also briefly explored in this article and are open to further interpretation.

Conceptual Framework and Research Scaffolds

In addition to my own curiosity as a professor in this area, four sources inspired this preliminary exploration: (1) the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration’s (NCPEA) Living Legend Awards, recognized annually since 1999 (<http://www.ncpea.net>); (2) Kiewra and Creswell’s (2000) study of highly productive educational psychologists, which identified living legends—Richard Anderson, Richard Mayer, Michael Pressley, and Ann Brown—through nominators’ eyes; (3) Culbertson’s (1995) seminal work on the University Council for Educational Administration’s (UCEA) history that provides insight into the creation of this organizational inter-university system and those pioneering scholars involved; and (4) Murphy’s (1999) “self-portrait of the profession,” informed by professors in school administration programs.

Kiewra and Creswell’s (2000) study benefited from their ongoing research on productive scholars. They combined a field-based survey approach with dialogic case study methods, interviewing the “most successful” nominees. Adapting but also modifying this approach to satisfy my own objectives, I surveyed practicing educational leadership professors in their role of peer nominator. To obtain as many responses as possible and to dilute the influence of any particular “filter” on the outcomes, I did not seek sponsorship from an association or funding agency, instead accessing different venues over time.

Murphy’s (1999) study also explored professors’ concepts of important markers in the academy over one decade (e.g., reform efforts and publications and presentations within the field). Interestingly, those authors and works cited as seminal from 1987 to 1996 overlapped with the results of my own study carried out seven years later.

Of the top four nominees in my own study—in alphabetical order, John Goodlad (University of Washington, retiree), John Hoyle (Texas A&M University), Joseph Murphy (Vanderbilt University), and Thomas Sergiovanni (Trinity University)—

all but one (John Hoyle) were listed in Murphy’s results. Since my survey question did not specify what configures a “living legend,” the possibilities for naming new and different individuals extended beyond the use of publications and citations as a traditional marker of excellence in the academy. The results outlined in Table 1 support this perception, as criteria generated by nominees for making these decisions were much more comprehensive and show value for theory/practice links. However, despite these differences between the two studies (e.g., my own pool of participants was greater, list of nominations longer, and survey question open-ended), the core selections of Murphy’s respondents mirrored my own. This suggests outcomes beyond

the scope of either of the studies, each reinforcing the other and, perhaps, enhancing validity. However, neither Murphy's study nor my own claim to have comprehensively sampled the discipline, opting instead for a purposeful sampling, consistent with a preliminary exploration. This is also the case for Kiewra and Creswell's study.

Participant Pool and Study Method

Nominated Scholars

The many persons forwarded as exceptional by faculty peers may all qualify as "scholar-practitioners" for whom their academic productivity inextricably links to impact and application within the field. While most can be described as full-fledged scholars who have significantly influenced national trends and policies in addition to local contexts, others were selected for their leadership roles within school districts and the community. However, the majority of exceptional scholars nominated work within the academy in various disciplines, primarily educational administration, in one of two respects: (1) broadly representing educational studies within such areas as business, politics, humanities, and philosophy, or (2) specializing in educational leadership with a focus on school leadership, higher education, or teacher education, and in such areas as supervision, school–university collaboration, leadership preparation, policy, and reform.

1 Survey Methods

Pilot and group discourse. For the survey "The Greatest Living Scholars of Our Time" (that some quipped to be a "tough assignment") recipients were asked to "take a moment to make a difference by answering this question," to nominate one person, and to "briefly jot down the reason(s) for your choice." The form alluded to the necessity of being able to make an informed judgment ("this survey assumes that you're in the field of educational leadership"). It was established that any feedback would be anonymously reported. A pilot sampling, conducted in 2002 at a doctoral research-extensive metropolitan university in Florida, involved eight educational leadership professors. The question was openly tested and the interest level gauged. This process further verified the value/importance of the question itself, so I broadened my data collection efforts. I also learned that some faculty wanted either to nominate more than one person or to vote with reservations, an outcome that foreshadowed an emerging pattern on a larger scale for some respondents.

Fuller sampling and distribution. Turning to listserves of professional associations, I accessed those most relevant to my study, including university-based educational leadership departments located through Internet searches. Conference councils and educational leadership editorial teams also received the survey. My goal was to obtain 200 surveys—214 (6%) complete responses were received; additionally, 19 electronic messages were returned explaining why a nomination was not possible. In all, 233 (7%) responses were analyzed. Approximately 3,500 individuals would have received the survey (some more than once), but this number proved impossible to accurately track.

While the goal set for the completed surveys was met, the very low return rate needs to be addressed, especially when one considers that a good response rate of 50 to 60% is generally considered accepted for survey research (Diem, 2002). However, at least one social science research team has found that its traditional paper survey yielded a higher response rate (60%) than the same questionnaire distributed electronically, which dropped significantly to 27%; this led them to question whether e-surveys are a reliable means of collecting data from a targeted population (Fraze, Hardin, Brashears, Smith, & Lockaby, 2003). In the long list provided by Newman (2002) for increasing one's response rate from surveys in general, I used most of the suggestions—provide a salient question, indicate why the respondent's answer matters, keep the survey short and simple, use university identification and a personalized note, and follow up with a reminder. I did not make many telephone calls or offer monetary incentives, both optional strategies for maximizing one's response rate.

While I do not know why for certain why the response rate was low, several possibilities do come to mind. For one thing, the tensions evident in some of the responses (and non-votes) received suggest that the nature of the topic itself is controversial. Asking who the most exceptional scholar in educational leadership is today may seem confounded for those who question the very notion of "greatness," especially among one's living contemporaries, or those who can think of more than one person, or those who can think of no one

at all deserving of such status. As Renzetti and Lee (1993) acknowledge, researching sensitive topics poses conceptual, methodological, and imaginative challenges, an explanation that describes my own experience.

As another possibility, there is little control that can be exerted over a study that is conducted electronically and where the recipients, although from a targeted population, may question the survey focus or the researcher's motives. This is why I spent additional time collecting the data, re-stating the purpose of the study, eliciting some responses in-person, and emailing reminders to non-respondents, all as strategies for seeking a higher response rate.

Specifically, the survey was electronically circulated to the American Educational Research Association's (AERA) Division A (Administration), which had 820 members in 2002, and AERA's Division K (Teaching & Teacher Education), which had 1,004 (<http://www.aera.net>). Additionally, representatives of UCEA's executive council and member institutes were recipients (<http://www.ucea.org>), along with NCPEA's 1,622 members (<http://www.ncpea.org>). Thirty-five leadership professors also represented the Florida Association of Professors of Educational Leadership Association (FAPEL).

Deviation from Kiewra–Creswell study. Unlike Kiewra and Creswell (2000), who generated a list of names based on AERA's Division C (Learning and Instruction) membership, I did not preselect scholars to be rated. I strove to avoid tying the results to particular associations and their "star" leaders, which could have limited and even biased the data. And I did not want to presume what "living scholar" might mean to others, so I avoided defining this term. Those respondents who forwarded the names of two exceptional scholars, explaining their reasoning for this decision, had both votes counted. Also, in contrast with Kiewra and Creswell's focus on cognition and learning for their survey and recipient pool, my own form provided no premapping or compartmentalization relative to educational leadership. Reasons for selecting any particular area, such as supervision or policy, seemed arbitrary, serving only to privilege one at the expense of another. I opted for openness, hoping this would promote greater inclusion or representation of the educational leadership field and hence provide a rich data set of interest to readers.

Finally, the Kiewra and Creswell results were based on 41 (out of 113) responses. The 233 I received from nominators also compares with the 105 that Murphy (1999) collected.

Saturation and data analysis. The scholars recognized as exceptional in this study achieved this status once the data (i.e., votes cast and reasons provided) revealed clear patterns. Also, the response data (reasons given for selections) were coded, and key words and phrases highlighted, in search of potential themes, applying Miles and Huberman's (1994) qualitative procedures for data management and analysis.

Discussion of Survey Results

In supplying the reason(s) for their choice, respondents generally emphasized areas of importance, specific contributions, and lines of work, even areas that personally influenced their own scholarship. Others noted publications and further scholarly contributions.

Four scholars have been identified as exceptional in this article. Although many more names were forwarded, some with obvious and consistent support by the voting body, a demarcation became evident based on the sheer number of tallies over time. A top tier consisting of four individuals had emerged in addition to a second and third tier.

Those finalists identified here are all white males. A number of females and a few minorities were nominated (and some were nominators), but not to the point of selection. Although there has been a dramatic increase of women in educational leadership, school leadership certification programs, and leadership positions in national level associations (e.g., UCEA, NCPEA, and AERA), male scholars may be publishing more frequently (Engstrom, 1999). As McCarthy (1999) speculated, women as a group have been faculty in this field for fewer years than men, and so have "not yet hit their stride" in terms of scholarly productivity and impact (p. 202). As another possibility, male scholars may be receiving greater recognition for works disseminated and scholarly efforts made. The same trend probably applies to minority scholars. Obviously, such trends and possibilities should be closely examined in the context of equity, ethics, and policy development in academe, as recommended by Haring (1998) and other scholars.

Different Readings of the Question

The survey question was interpreted in various ways. While some viewed it from a national policy perspective, others considered contribution to the scholarly field, schools, or novice leaders.

Selection Criteria and Reasons

The criteria of selection and reasons given were numerous; these are summarized in Table 1. The entries (appearing on the left) represent the themes that emerged from the response data and each quote (on the right) provides support from two or more respondents for the corresponding theme; these all characterize the “typical” comments received.

The four scholars selected as leading academics do not evenly fulfill all of the criteria listed, perhaps because each is known for particular spheres of influence (e.g., leadership standards, administrator program preparation reform, ethics and moral leadership, K–12 institutional partnership). Nonetheless, all were associated with such dimensions as significant and broad impact on scholarship and the field, national spheres of public influence, and mentoring and multi-authoring systems. The reasons provided extend beyond the traditional association with publication rates and impact via frequency of citation as markers of scholarly excellence. The proliferating criteria also fit with some of the emerging contemporary trends in our field, such as the increase since 1986 of university faculty committing to improving relationships with schools and practitioners, developing field-based components in preparation programs, and focusing more on ethics in professional practice (McCarthy, 1999; Mullen, Gordon, Greenlee, & Anderson, 2002).

However, the recurring reasons that were forwarded virtually bypassed contributions in the areas of diversity and social justice as well as alternative paradigms, such as feminism, critical theory, and postmodernism. Perhaps these and other philosophically critical locations will emerge in a more exhaustive sampling or a future one. A critical reader of a draft version of this article asserted that the results “reflect a chasm in the field, which is still very traditional while moving ahead.”

Going Wide/Deep as Reformers

Those who functioned broadly in their work and impact received more tallies within the discipline than scholars who functioned more narrowly. This pattern suggests that those receiving an abundance of votes were perceived as having a higher value. However, those who have made significant inroads in an educational leadership domain, such as administrator program preparation reform, were simultaneously associated with specific change agendas. Going wide/deep was a salient pattern, then, associated with “living legend.” Generally speaking, nominees had appeared to construct their own meaning of “exceptional,” seeing this as a comprehensive effort closely related to particular reform agendas. Fullan (1999) explains that “large scaleness” is only possible where human contact has been fully established and a “multilevel system” has been managed on a “continuous basis” (p. 74). Although Fullan was addressing large-scale reforms per se rather than particular reformers, these can be linked as I have done in this discussion.

2 Tensions in the Data Analysis

As is evident from Table 1, the results proved productive for identifying criteria that some academics currently associate with outstanding scholarship. In contrast, a minority (19 individuals) offered powerful insights into why nomination was simply not feasible to them. For a few, the very use of “our field” in the survey question was problematic: “I see a problem with your question vis-à-vis your use of the label ‘our field.’” Respondents doubtless thought about the heroes in their own areas of study.

Granted, the concept of “field” is very tricky. English (2003) critiques “field” and its cousin “knowledge base” as leftovers from modernism, denying a plurality of realities, truths, and interpretations. Postmodernism brings context, human agency, and multiplicity into the foreground: Educational leadership, similar to leadership studies, incorporates “a broad range of perspectives,” from descriptive to social scientific to humanistic and drawing upon the interpretive methods of history, literature, philosophy, and education (Johnson, 1996, p. 13). Another perception is that educational leadership is changing: The intent to bridge theory with practice has created an “emerging discipline that transcends the academy precisely because it is more than mere scholarship; it is scholarship plus” (Born, 1996, p. 47).

The hybrid or “borrowing” nature of educational administration has produced a composite field, arousing concern. Someone shared, “I’ve been deeply troubled by the many contradictions between American democratic ideals and the theories and notions borrowed from business, the military, and the social sciences being subsumed within the field of education administration with little scrutiny.” Because of the increasingly

amorphous nature of educational leadership, another argued in favor of actually creating a “field” that has boundaries and a distinct identity: “Without clear, substantive differences from other academic departments, educational administration as a field of serious scholarly inquiry has no legitimate grounds on which to defend its continued existence within academe, particularly while higher education is being downsized.”

For still others, the use of “living scholar” understandably incited confusion and controversy, as thoughtfully articulated: “In good conscience I must say that I find the term living scholar something of an oxymoron. My definition may be out of style these days, but I believe before one can be considered a scholar that person’s writings or orations must have withstood the tests of time.” Interestingly, this decision evoked “considerable difficulty. Every time I visit your email the same questions prevent an answer—does ‘greatest living’ mean most frequently cited by other scholars? Most followed by practitioners? Contributed the greatest theoretical insights about leadership?”

Done most to redirect the field of study? Or, added most to the empirical base for understanding leadership?”

My reaction to all of these pivotal concerns is that while the survey question is laden with datable, slippery concepts (i.e., “the field,” “living scholar,” “exceptional,” and even “educational leadership”), so is the profession itself. Further, the question solicited valuable information—it is useful to see the multiple, disjointed, and even contradictory viewpoints taken. Areas of consensus also surfaced from this mixed response, as captured in Table 1. Accounting for the feedback of non-voting members as I have done here has made visible issues of contention. Those who provided critiques about the nominating process and suggestively about its validity performed a probing hermeneutic deconstruction that was treated as data and thematically analyzed, with some attention given here.

Contextual Influences and Background Issues

One crucial insight of survey respondents was, “Who is outstanding in educational leadership and administration or any scholarly field is really framed by the times and the needs.” In many respects, this resounding message has greater worth than the criteria and even the participants’ selections. Certainly, context matters, a reality that keeps the idea of “living legend” and practice of hero-worshipping in perspective. This admission of temporality and contextuality contrasts with the view that the living legend “finalists” represent a static, noncontroversial choice.

The results, inevitably debatable from almost any angle, are also influenced by the methods I have selected and the venues surveyed. Regardless of my attempt to appraise the educational leadership field as comprehensively as possible, a disjointedly configured domain required piecemeal, “pick and shovel” sampling. Because no single “repository” exists to which all leadership professors belong, it is currently not possible to communicate with the complete constituency and at one time. Such systemic barriers make it clear that any such study should not be construed as the last word on the subject of exceptional scholarship.

In addition to systemic barriers to data collection, other contextual issues included political alliances, decision-making challenges, and generational biases. Some scholarly communities hold tight allegiances, making it difficult to know the extent to which nominations were influenced by loyalty rather than informed judgment. In a few instances, junior professors “confessed” that they had nominated their former major professors. Perhaps more exhaustive sampling procedures would have better monitored the influence of political entanglements; on the other hand, these seem inherent in the psyche of any discipline. Other contextual influences underscore how challenging it proved for some respondents to make a single selection. This struggle emphasizes just how demanding this decision-making process can be as well as—this is the good news—the high number of outstanding leaders from which to select. A few participants even postulated that no such scholars currently exist, except as experts within their own domain. But most persons did provide a nomination, even where disclaimers had been announced, an admission that supports the contentious notion that leading scholars for contemporary times can in fact be identified, even where tensions and uncertainty are embedded in the conclusions and where debate is inevitable and ongoing.

As mentioned, a generational bias entered into the results but once again the degree of influence is unknown. More senior professors generally know the older or more established generation of scholars, whereas those younger have familiarity with the newer “stars.” Several nominees addressed this phenomenon, as in: “The more scholarly respondents might tend to select someone who is treasured within their field for the

writing they have done. Personally, I am not as up-to-date with names because my own heroes are mostly retirees; in fact, I am ignorant of the mid-career hotshots who are making good waves.”

Final Remark

The issues of complexity raised herein suggest that while nominations of “living legends” seem possible, especially where constituents have formulated criteria, deeper issues prevail. Nominators forwarded useful and revealing criteria supporting their decision making—a process thoughtfully undertaken, particularly by those sharing reflections and caveats. And the dissenting critiques proved invaluable as well. Nominators provided clues about the patterns of educational leadership they most value, the individuals to whom they have looked for guidance, the status of the field, and emergent trends.

Further research is needed that continues work on the controversial topic of exceptional scholarship in educational leadership. Debate is also encouraged about the topics of significance raised: The critical tensions explored herein that capture the thinking of some university faculty in addition to the self-identifying criteria for the votes cast would benefit from a community-wide response.

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Author Notes

The respondent quotes appearing on this chart (and in this article) have been synthesized and slightly altered, rendered gender-neutral where possible and anonymous, protecting both the nominees and the

nominators. I am grateful to the faculty nominators who generously shared their perceptions. Also, I appreciate the helpful critique provided by the editor and the two reviewers.

Acronyms for national standards used by nominators:

Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC); Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC); National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE)

Table 1
Nominators' Self-Identifying Criteria for Characterizing Exceptional Scholarship (2002–2003)

Salient Criteria Provided	Typical Survey Quotes
Actively creates national level discussion about scholarship and the field, connecting research productivity to discourse in the field	The historical studies of the principalship, studies of leadership of school improvement, publication on the core work of educational administration, and the follow-up discussions that were led around that work have all contributed to pulling the field together.
Appraises, critiques, or develops professional guide the field (e.g., principalship administration preparation, applied theory of education)	The writings and conference papers standards that produced have been key to my leadership of program development at the master's level. The honest appraisal of our field has been a most refreshing aspect of the work because we cannot improve (or "protect") our field by ignoring our glaring weaknesses. We have been given a base upon which we can begin genuinely restructuring programs that might just prepare principals and not just fulfill the usual political "necessities" that are more about protectionism and monetary gain than leadership of leaders.
Bridges the practitioner community of school administrators with colleagues in the academy and broadly influences the thinking of both cultural groups	The works are widely read by scholars and practitioners alike, and the contributions to the field of educational leadership are widely recognized. The personal rapport with the practitioner community is unparalleled, and this person is particularly impressive in the ability to link the practitioner community of the administrator associations with colleagues in the academy.
Incorporates most comprehensive and deepest reach in educational administration or a related discipline	Has the broadest and deepest grasp of the research and theory on educational administration of any scholar I know and works tirelessly on writing and speaking about it.
Career accomplishments highly impressive	Although this person teaches every semester, time is found for significant professional activity in the areas of consultancies, speaking engagements, publishing, and other scholarly pursuits. Has a lot of big studies—is a very prolific author whose work and impact spans teacher preparation, higher education, and K–12 leadership.
Challenges assumptions, informs at a heightened level, and produces reflection and personal change	The sheer volume of work, combined with the quality of ideas, challenges me to think about the profession in new ways.
Commits to ethical, humane concepts and practices	I appreciate this individual's understanding of both the human and task dimensions of leadership and the intelligence to select and prioritize on the side of ethical humane behaviors. Has consistently demonstrated a sensitivity to the phenomenological and moral aspects of school leadership and written about these in a challenging way for the larger audience of practicing public school administrators.
Draws together multiple scholars in major works (e.g., handbook or yearbook)	The editorial leadership of the <i>Second Edition of the Handbook on Administrative Leadership</i> and the more recent <i>NSEE Yearbook on Leadership for the 21st Century</i> were seminal efforts.
Focuses on change process and school reform on a large scale	I believe this individual's work has impacted scholars and practitioners on school improvement and effectiveness beyond anyone living. The work done on the change process is first rate.
Looks forward and is innovative in times of risk	The writer and the writing have always exhibited a willingness to forward innovative thought in times where innovation was not particularly valued in the educational leadership/administration field.

Table 1 (continued)

Guides others in a mentoring/collegial capacity	Approachable and supportive of novice researchers. I met and worked with this person during my first year in the academy
Achieved international reputation and worldwide impact in schools, scholarship, and policy	and was treated with respect as a fellow colleague. Represents the best of the profession. Is known and appreciated worldwide, not just in North America (this should be a key criterion in the selections).
Leads of the standards movement in educational leadership and learning, impacting the preparation of prospective school administrators	Has done more than anyone else by having facilitated the standards movement. Has influenced the standards by which educational leaders are prepared in many American states by leading the development of the ISLLC standards, which has greatly influenced NCATE/ELCC standards and, in turn, the preparation of school administrators. The work inside and outside the field toward developing the ISLLC standards is a testament of the commitment to improve administrator preparation and practice
Publishes widely and is highly recognized and cited	This person has influenced the thinking in numerous practitioners and professors, is the author I turn to frequently in my work with principals and in my own writing, and is probably cited more than anyone else in our field.
Promotes national policy perspectives in various contexts and venues	I read your survey question to mean, who is getting the play at the national level in terms of influencing foundations, think-tanks, and so forth?
Visionary capacity shapes the direction of the field	The most futuristic, brilliant, vision-oriented scholar and practitioner in educational leadership today. This person's contributions to the field are numerous and legendary—has written extensively about leadership preparation, which includes visionary perspectives. By framing the past with a focus on the future, recommendations are provided about how to align administrator education with the real work in schools (the theory-to-practice link).