

Developing Leadership Literacy: A University-School District Partnership

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Abstract

This project analyzes a long-standing school district-based leadership development program in British Columbia, Canada, and its transition to a partnership with the local university in which the students receive credit toward a graduate degree. The intent of this study was to explore the change process in leadership development from a school district-based program to a joint venture between the school district and the local university. Historical data was gathered to situate the pre-existing program. Interviews with key participants in the process of changing to program were held. Consideration of the research literature about current leadership program partnerships and a mapping to the interviews reveals this program to be in line with effective leadership development partnerships according to research findings, and highly innovative in the province of British Columbia. Future considerations are addressed.

Early History of the Executive Development Program, 1967-1980's

The post-World War II baby boom had a tremendous impact on the number of children attending school in British Columbia; from 1952 to 1967 student enrolment grew from just 200,000 to 475,000 (Owram, 1996, p. 114). As well, post-war affluence, long-term tendencies toward increased education, and more regular school attendance meant that children were staying in school longer and with more commitment.

In the late 1960s structural and philosophical changes were taking place in elementary education, and training for leadership positions in these newly configured schools was seen to be falling short.

The programme developed at a time when many changes were occurring in elementary education. Continuous progress and all its attendant problems required a rethinking of the organizational and educational apparatus. Alternate instructional techniques such as team teaching [and] differentiated staffing were undergoing examination and implementation. These demands placed challenges on principals [who] demanded a re-examination of the training and schooling of the educational leader in the school – the principal. (Mowbray, 1975, p. 3-4)

The Leadership Development Program (LDP) began in 1967 as the Executive Development Program (EDP), an elementary administrative program for the Kamloops-Thompson School District (then known as School District #24; today as School District #73). It was the first such program in the province of British Columbia. Rationale for

instituting the program was threefold: schooling had become an almost universal experience for the province's burgeoning number of children; the school system was seen as being in a state of change, which required a new skill set for leaders; and previous methods of recruiting and selecting administrative leaders were being replaced by scientific approaches.

In Kamloops and, indeed, in the rest of the province, recruitment to leadership positions – particularly at the elementary level – had hitherto occurred on the basis of the candidate's connections to other leaders, or sometimes because they were one of a handful of males (typically physical education teachers) in a sea of female teachers. In presenting his rationale for instituting the EDP, Downey (1967) declared: “[As] one attempts to look into the future and anticipate the need for leadership talent, one cannot help but be alarmed – for virtually nothing is being done to identify and develop what potential there is for leadership in tomorrow's schools.” To further fuel this concern, in a series of well-known studies into change and improvement in education, social scientists uncovered the fact that, in many instances, it was the leader, himself—the principal of the school – who was the greatest impediment to progress (Downey, 1967). School district leaders hoped that in the face of a rapidly changing and increasingly complex society, the EDP would serve as a vehicle to select and develop leaders appropriate to the task. As Toews (1969), argued when addressing the province's principals and vice-principals in 1969: “It is ludicrous to think any of us within ourselves have the necessary knowledge, skills, and insight available to survive” (p. 1).

The assumption behind the EDP was that leadership skills were “identifiable and developable” (Centre for the Study of Administration in Education, September, 1967,

p.1). The EDP developed an enviable reputation as being an innovative method by which to develop leaders who, moreover, stayed in the school district. In 1975 School Trustee Anita McNutt (1975) stated: ‘The words trustees of School District #24 continually hear is, ‘You are known as the lighthouse district’’. The Executive Development Program was part of that ‘lighthouse’ status.

The Leadership Development Program, 1990’s – 2000’s

Over time, the program was re-named the ‘Leadership Development Program’ in recognition of the many program graduates who moved on to “teacher leadership” roles, and not just principal-ships (executive positions).

Although within the first 10 years of program development there was a concern that it was focused too heavily on school-based training with insufficient attention paid to external training courses and formal university courses, it was not until the late 1990s that the theoretical component was fully developed to balance the practical focus. This theoretical component was provided through evening or weekend classes, or during in-service days during the week. This training became known as ‘Theory into Practice’, and covered a variety of topics related to school management and instructional leadership.

From its beginnings in the 1960’s, the EDP/LDP has been overseen by a steering committee of principals and senior executives. During the mid-2000’s, the steering group identified that the experiences of LDP interns had been too disparate and uneven and needed a higher level of consistency.

In the late spring of 2009, financial constraints required the school district to put the LDP program on hold for one year. However, when the school district budget allowed for

the reinstatement of the program, the program had to be postponed for yet another year due to strike action by the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF).

Those in senior leadership positions in the district felt the temporary program hiatus was a serendipitous time to re-examine the structure of the program. A parallel initiative undertaken by Thompson Rivers University (TRU) helped to transform the 'look' of the LDP to one that is characterized by a heightened academic approach to the education of potential leaders in SD #73. It was a chance, to paraphrase John Dewey, to not only, "make theory practical, but to make practice intelligent." (Stuhr, 2003, p. 49).

Program Development – TRU and SD #73

The theoretical basis for the LDP is twofold: the development of people as a core leadership practice, and finding a balance between the development of the theoretical understanding of leadership, through what we call 'leadership literacy', and the acquisition of management skills.

Leithwood and Riehl (2005), building on the work of MacGregor Burns (1978) and transformational leadership, suggest that a basic set of successful leadership practices can be adapted to suit any context. Although variations occur depending upon an individual's style, the following three categories can be considered core to effective leadership practice: setting directions, building relationships and developing people, and developing the organization to support desired practices (Leithwood et al., 2004). A fourth core practice was delineated in 2012, that of improving the instructional program, as a result of the large Wallace Foundation study that linked leadership to student learning (Leithwood et al., 2012). The second of these practices, developing people, continues to be an area of

intrigue and dialogue with significant implications for leadership development programs. Researchers have focused attention on the topic of ‘developing people’, not simply because it is an interesting concept, but because schools that create or foster stronger connections are better equipped to meet the challenges and demands within education, and also the uncertainty in our environments. Establishing solid, trusting relationships with students, teachers, parents, and communities is critical to success, not only the principal’s success, but also the success of the school. As Lupart and Webber (2002) claim, a climate of mutual trust and respect is imperative if there is to be any chance of successful reform. Trust between teachers and a school leader actually improves student achievement (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). Fukuyama (1995) describes trust as a lubricant, which facilitates the effective organizational systems required for efficient and positive organizations (in Handford & Leithwood, 2013).

One of the ways that leaders affect the mission and climate of the school is by generating empowerment among educators. They lead the way in identifying and removing barriers, and increasing the learning opportunities for all students. It was previously noted above that Leithwood (2004, 2005, 2007) identified “developing people” as one of the core categories of leadership practices. These practices serve as a catalyst for unleashing the potential capacities that already exist in the organization. Those in leadership roles have a tremendous responsibility to ‘get it right’ (Leithwood, 2007). The importance of leadership development programs in working with and developing people is often the process of developing capacity and creating new knowledge. The process of developing people does not spontaneously happen; an intentional approach in leadership development is clearly needed. The process involved in gaining understanding and developing the

insights in working with and developing people is paramount in effective leadership and a necessary component of leadership development programs.

Along with this core leadership practice of developing people, another key assumption of the LDP encompasses both domains of leadership and management. The original ‘four pillars’ of the EDP included elements of what may now be considered management as well as instructional leadership. The four pillars were:

- technical-managerial (to be an efficient manager)
- human-managerial (to be an influential leader)
- technical-educational (to be knowledgeable in curriculum development)
- speculative-creative (to be an agent of change and improvement)

(Centre for the Study of Administration in Education, September, 1967.) These pillars were identified long before Heifetz and Linsky smoothed the thinking into two strands, the adaptive and the technical aspects of leadership, but not surprisingly, the pillars correspond to their task analysis (2002).

The original expectation of the program was that to be adequately prepared for formal leadership roles in the District, interns (students in the EDP/LDP) would need the knowledge and skills of a manager, (the technical) while learning the attitudes of a leader (the adaptive). At the time the program started, training for educational administrators was heavily influenced by what Greenfield (1993) called ‘science in educational administration’. This approach to the study of administration came from Herbert Simon’s *Administrative Behaviour* (1945), which treated it as a social science from a positivistic stance – predictable and controllable.

As the program progressed and time moved on, there was a shift from the technical, managerial skills to a more adaptive, leadership focus. The name changed to the Leadership Development Program in part as recognition of the focus on leadership. This shift paralleled the thinking in leadership literature. The positivist “managerialism” inspired by Simon and other early 20th century writers in scientific administration gave way to a humanistic model that focused on leadership (Greenfield, 1993).

The move away from managerialism to a leadership focus brought a new interest in ethics (Hodgkinson, 1983) and a new generation of leadership theories (Goethals & Sorenson, 2006), which were welcome additions to principal preparation programs such as the LDP. Gronn (2003) notes that “... in the mid-1980s, as a part of leadership exceptionalism, commentators began to canonize leadership and demonise management” (p. 269). This type of thinking has been demonstrated in numerous versions of a set of dualisms that have served to overstate the dichotomy. For example, Warren Bennis suggests that:

The manager administers; the leader innovates. The manager is a copy; the leader is an original. The manager maintains; the leader develops. The manager focuses on systems and structure; the leader focuses on people. The manager relies on control; the leader inspires trust...the manager does things right; the leader does the right thing. (1991, p. 23-24)

In recent years, the pendulum has begun to shift towards a balance between leadership

and management. This has evolved from a number of influences. First of all, there has been recognition of the duties undertaken by school leaders. Research on the actual lives and duties of principals/vice-principals has identified their inevitable and inexorable 'managerial' tasks (Gronn, 2003; Møller, 2000; Thomson, 2009). Secondly, in jurisdictions such as the United Kingdom (Everard, Morris, & Wilson, 2004) and Norway (Møller, 2000), decentralization has structurally put more administrative demands on school leaders, requiring them to undertake additional tasks traditionally considered to be management (such as human resources and finance). This acknowledgement of the pragmatic realities faced by school leaders has been supported by a number of scholars that refuse to accept the false dichotomy of leadership-management (Bolman & Deal, 1997; Bush, 2006; Everard et al., 2004; Gronn, 2003; Lunenburg, 2011). Bolman and Deal describe it thus:

Leading and managing are different, but both are important. When organizations are over managed but under led, they eventually lose any sense of spirit or purpose. Poorly managed organizations with strong charismatic leaders may soar briefly only to crash shortly thereafter. ...The challenges of modern organizations require the objective perspective of managers as well as the brilliant flashes of vision and commitment that wise leadership provides (Bolman & Deal, 1997, p. xiii).

When the LDP made the move to TRU to change the theoretical training component into a graduate program, a decision was made to put the focus back onto management knowledge/skills as well as leadership theory. This reflected both the thinking of the

evolving literature listed above, as well as the practical realities of what the interns needed to learn to be successful as a principal/vice-principal.

Findings

The change process in leadership development from a school district-based program to a joint venture between the school district and its local university was explored through structured interviews. Spanning several decades, former program participants and directors provided a rich and detailed account of their experiences as part of the LDP. In analyzing the changes and continuities in the leadership program, it should be noted that during this time period, 1967 to 2012, the population of the City of Kamloops grew from 22,000 to 86,000.

Findings suggest that key components of the program include the development of an administrative learning community involving mentorship, the inclusion of a significant practicum component, and a vision of the necessary skills and dispositions necessary for the growth of the school district and its leaders.

As mentioned, all of the individuals who participated in the study were part of the LDP, either as applicants, interns, or as directors or administrators involved in leading the program. The interviews identified the intersection of theory and practice as a common theme through the evolution of the LDP. The strengths identified continually spoke to this importance. A retired superintendent provided an historical context:

[The program] created a logical or a more detailed process of selecting potential school leaders rather than people on staff applying

for the job of vice-principal and facing an interview and getting the job or not getting the job, then working up to be a principal. I found . . . the training provided strength in educational leadership and supervision of the education process in that school, in other words it wasn't just a guy who could just administer well, or a woman, but it was someone who could actually provide educational leadership in the whole process of education.

A current administrator spoke to the evolution and integration of theory into practice, and practice into theory.

The philosophy or the intent when it first began was to better prepare teachers to be administrators. I think what is continually changing is the theoretical part, and how over forty years, education changes, and it changes yearly, so I love the fact that our district has been flexible. How we address the theoretical changes in LDP then becomes part of what I want to do as an administrator in the district.

In addition, another retired administrator who was a graduate of the LPD as well as involved in the delivery, reiterated how theory was imbedded in the program.

It was the actual practice or practicing that you got feedback on. That was one of the things that determined whether you got into the program or not. But the district also took responsibility, so they would have professional development or service time for the candidates or interns.

Each of the participants reported that mentorship was a significant component not only to the LDP but also to leadership development. The participants noted a significant discrepancy in the quality as well as the structure of the mentorship.

If you have a great mentor, it's an unbelievable program. I talk to them about things that they're interested in, ask so what do you want to do? And then I stretch them and say you have very little experience in drama and in music, we're going to push you a little bit there because I need to. When we do discipline, you know you get a phone call and all of a sudden a kid's coming to school with a machete, all of a sudden you have disclosure. They'll sit in on it simply as an observer and then as you work through the process, a month, two months, three months, you turn it over and say you know you can have this one, any questions see me right after.

For all of the interviewees, mentorship allowed them significant time to observe and develop their understanding as well as hone their skills.

There is no doubt that both the practicing principal and the intern learned from each other, but through the mentorship relationship, the practicing principal also fine-tuned her mentoring abilities.

We should sit down and I should learn something from you, not just be being the mentor, you take on a project so I'm learning something. So there has got to be a reciprocal relationship . . . The best thing from LDP is that you take a little bit of the best from everybody to create who you

are as an administrator or [as a] leader. I don't want you to be me, I don't want you to discipline the way I discipline, but I want you to take what you think works with your personality, with your vision, with your philosophy, and incorporate that into how you handle things, and then move forward that way.

The individuals who participated in the study provided a rich context for understanding the evolution of a collaborative leadership development program. The essence of this collaboration has been to provide greater academic rigor to the school-based program while maintaining practical relevance.

Summary

This research is unique because of the significant historical data documenting 45 years of a district-led leadership development program. The study examines how historical practice and current leadership theory can be intentional and strategic in re-visioning leadership development programs. In its transition from an Executive Development Program to the Leadership Development Program and more recently to a university graduate program, the school district has shown itself to be adaptive to the changing demands on school leaders.

Other components have remained steady through its long history, most notably the sustained focus on mentorship, the practicum, and the practical realities of being an educational leader. There is no doubt that the school district's commitment to resourcing this integral component to the LDP is a distinguishing feature of the program and a major factor of its success.

Next Steps

The journey has continued to evolve since 2012. A new faculty member was hired, bringing with her a theoretical and practical background in education leadership. A shift to ‘leadership literacy’, with a clear focus on the concepts and terms of leadership research, applied to the daily practice of school leadership, began to emerge. It was reported by both an assistant school superintendent and the school superintendent that leadership language in meetings, in corridors, and in interviews for leadership positions is being used by graduates, and is beginning to build the culture of leadership within the district. People are talking about concepts and understanding how these relate to effective school leadership, school management and , of greatest importance, to student learning and achievement. Research to determine the ‘uptake’ of leadership language is being conducted in the 2014-15 academic school year.

If leaders at all levels speak the language of leadership – that technical is only of use when it is connected with adaptive skills, that the world changes far too quickly and there are far too many demands for leaders to be unidimensional, we will be stronger. When we acknowledge that within the credible leadership literature in the last 30 years there has been a complete identification of the abilities required for effective leadership we will build shared understanding. And strong leadership literacy (the theory) combined with the implementation of the same (the practice) actually results in improvements in student learning and achievement, the identified goal of education at its both its simplest and its most profound, to the tune of up to 25%, we will be ready to embrace the words, “Leadership is second only to teaching in improving student learning and achievement” (Leithwood et al, 2012, 2004).

The battle is over. The Leadership Development Program is a step towards infusing leadership literacy in a school district. In time, this will lead to a much more focused, intentional system that has shared understandings of the complex, multi-faceted nature of school leadership.

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