

Cross-boundary Leadership: A Framework for Understanding Leadership Preparation

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Through the conceptual framework of Cross-boundary leadership, this case study examines the influence of EDLE 6633 School/Community Collaboration, a doctoral course at Oklahoma State University, on course completer's capacity to effectively facilitate and sustain collaborative partnerships between schools and communities. Findings suggest that the course prepared educational leaders to lead from the perspectives of shared influence and shared responsibility; however, evidence also suggests modification to the existing course to more fully meet education goals.

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Community contexts in urban districts provide extraordinary challenges for school effectiveness. For example, increasing numbers of students living at or below the poverty level, fragmented or non-existent families, and cultural issues such as violence, substance abuse and unsafe neighborhoods make the challenges of educating students in these districts very complex (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014; Warren, 2011). In addition to these challenges, schools across the nation are facing financial crises threatening their very existence. For example, in a report to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Leachman and Mai (2014) indicated state per student funding in 35 states across the nation in 2013-2014 was lower than funding before the 2008 recession, and funding in 15 of those states was lower in 2014 than it was the previous year. More recently, Farmer (2016) reported nearly half of the states in the U.S. continue to provide less funding for schools than they provided before the recession began. What is becoming abundantly clear to educational leaders, policy makers, and researchers is the increased intensity of out-of-school factors that pervade in-school factors and hinder student performance, leaving the public school system with more responsibility than it is prepared to handle (Blankstein & Noguera, 2015; Casto, 2016; Green & Gooden, 2014; Milner, 2013; Noguera & Wells, 2011). These circumstances present unprecedented challenges to leaders in urban school districts requiring innovative leadership strategies to meet student needs.

One promising strategy for promoting student success is collaborative leadership; this leadership strategy promotes effective partnerships between stakeholders in a district. Research supports the understanding that establishing effective family/community/school partnerships is an essential component for student success (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Casto, 2016; Pounder, Reitzug, & Young, 2002; Zacarian & Silverstone, 2015). In 2005, Warren (2005) explained the school/community connection as one so close that “the fates of urban schools and communities are linked” (p. 133). More recent studies emphasize that high stakes accountability demands on urban districts to prepare students for workforce or college readiness reinforce the need for educational leaders to reach beyond the walls of the school and engage the larger community to meet student needs (Epstein, 2013; Blankstein & Noguera, 2015). Blankstein and Noguera (2015) refer to the need for “an ‘outward-facing’ perspective among (educational) leaders and teaching staff” to meet student needs in situations where staff feel “overburdened or confounded” (p. 2).

An outward facing perspective presents numerous implications for leadership. This approach suggests that reactionary reform or implementation of several decentralized efforts within a single building/district are ineffective approaches for school improvement (Jean-Marie, Ruffin, & Burr, 2010). Instead, educational leaders must lead their schools to engage in comprehensive reform that “works in tandem with communities to maximize their collective educational potential” (Jean-Marie, et. al., p. 15). Specifically, comprehensive school-wide reform (CSR) must advance civic capacity to generate partnerships between the public and private sector through the formation of networks and strategic alliances to strengthen schools, families and communities (Green, 2015; Jean-Marie et al. 2010). Now more than ever, leadership preparation programs must prepare their graduates to facilitate effective community/school partnerships to meet the needs of students (Blankstein & Noguera, 2015). Preparing educational leaders to lead and facilitate sustainable partnerships requires an intentional, directed focus on the part of educational leadership preparation programs.

Problem

Despite the importance of partnerships, educational leaders may graduate from educational leadership preparation programs lacking key understandings or the skills necessary to form and sustain effective partnerships because few traditional teacher and administrator preparation programs have developed a specific focus on the prevailing disconnection between families, communities, and schools (Epstein, 2013; Epstein & Sanders, 2006). Not only do most leadership preparation programs fail to emphasize global literacy needed for meeting the needs of increasingly diverse student populations (Brooks & Normore, 2009), they also do not emphasize the larger social context of families and communities in leadership practices (Epstein, 2013; Epstein & Sanders, 2006). The result has been teachers and administrators who view themselves as “relatively isolated individuals who think of themselves as individual leaders of classrooms, schools or districts, with little attention to the importance of teamwork and collaborations with parents, community partners, and others interested in students’ success in school” (Epstein & Sanders, 2006, p. 82).

Research indicates that most universities offer at least some training concerning the importance of parent/school partnerships in educator preparation programs (Epstein, 2013; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Miller, Lines, Sullivan, & Hermanutz, 2013). However, Epstein and Sanders (2006) and Epstein (2013) found graduates often leave those programs unprepared to successfully facilitate partnerships. Epstein and Sanders (2006) suggested that most training on partnerships is associated with preparing educators for work in early childhood or special education programs, leaving most graduating educational leaders to “piece together” information on family and community involvement from various courses (p. 110). Epstein’s (2013) findings led her to conclude that graduates of most preparation programs “are unprepared to work effectively with the families of students in the schools in which they are placed” (p. 115). Recent findings suggest that the situation has not dramatically improved. Miller et al. (2013) found that most information concerning partnership building is “infused into existing coursework” (p. 156). They also found “limited agreement about topics to cover or how to best develop (partnership) competencies” (p. 156).

In response to recognition of the need to prepare leaders for partnership efforts, Oklahoma State University School Administration faculty designed a required course, EDLE 6633 *School/Community Collaboration*, to instill in future building and district leaders an understanding about the importance of partnerships and to prepare educational leadership for effective collaboration. This course addresses the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Standards (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015) Standard 5 by developing students’ knowledge and understanding of the relationship of school and community as well as providing a framework to implement change for student success. Standard 5 states,

Leadership candidates who successfully complete a district level educational leadership preparation program understand and demonstrate the capability to promote the success and wellbeing of each student, teacher, and leader by applying the knowledge, skills and commitments necessary for (1) community engagement, (2) productive partnerships, (3) two-way communication, and (4) representation

(National Policy Board for Education Administration, 2015).

The undergirding philosophy of EDLE 6633 is developing leadership capacity to promote a culture of shared influence and collective responsibility among stakeholders for enhanced student and school performance (Adams & Jean-Marie, 2010; Curry, Jean-Marie, & Adams,

2016). This course emphasizes leadership that promotes enhanced practice and development of collaborative cultures to promote effective partnerships. Emphasis is placed on developing course completer skills of collaboration with family and community partners; understanding and utilizing community resources; facilitating and promoting cultures of shared influence and responsibility; and establishing and sustaining positive relationships with community and stakeholder partners. Students in the course develop and actively engage in projects designed to promote meaningful partnerships. What **was** unknown, however, is the effectiveness of this required course, a course specifically targeted to develop leadership capacity to promote, facilitate, and sustain meaningful partnerships, in shaping leaders' perceptions and practices concerning effective community/school collaboration or the sustainability of their partnership efforts after completing the course.

Purpose

Utilizing the conceptual framework of cross-boundary leadership, the purpose of this study was to understand the effectiveness of a course at Oklahoma State University, EDLE 6633 *School and Community Collaboration*, to prepare leaders who can develop, promote, and sustain partnerships between the school, families, and community in which they work. With the theoretical framework of cross-boundary leadership guiding this study, the following research questions were advanced:

Research questions

How did participation in EDLE 6633 School/Community Collaboration course influence student perceptions of their ability to develop sustainable school/family/community partnerships?

Sub-questions:

1. How did participation in EDLE 6633 influence student perceptions of and ability to mobilize shared influence in their buildings/districts?
2. How did participation in EDLE 6633 influence student perceptions of and ability to facilitate a sense of shared responsibility in partnership efforts?
3. How successful have students been in developing, facilitating, and sustaining partnership efforts?

Conceptual Framework

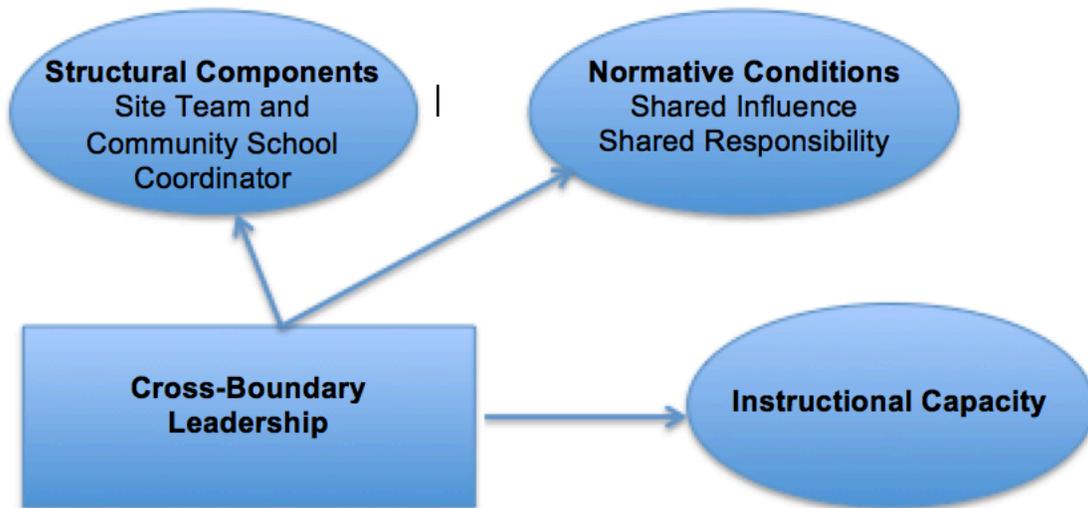
Collective leadership is a common approach in leadership preparation, and the term is often used interchangeably with “shared leadership,” “distributed leadership,” and “democratic leadership” (Harris, 2013a; Wang, Waldman, & Zhang, 2013). This type of leadership resides in a communal relationship where participants are both “shapers of” and “shaped by” one another (Jean-Marie & Curry, 2012). Together, these leaders work to develop and share new ideas and to sustain practices that work to foster a climate of shared purpose, teamwork, and mutual respect (Schacter & Langer, 2006; Harris, 2013a; Harris, 2013b). Collaboration is characterized by shared vision and goals, distributive leadership, transparency in actions, and high levels of communication (Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014; Kohm & Nance, 2009; Waldron & McLesky, 2010). According to Goulet, Krentz, and Christiansen (2003), collaboration is both phenomenon and process; it is “a particular way of coming together, thinking, and acting. Collaboration matures over time through

contributions that each participant makes through the process involved in consultation, collegial interactions, and cooperation” (p. 329).

Cross-boundary leadership builds upon ideas related to collaborative leadership because it is based on the idea that educational and social problems require collaborative approaches to leadership to cross structural boundaries and create a network of shared responsibility among the different spheres of influence in children’s lives (Green & Gooden, 2014). From this perspective, the role of leaders is to build capacity for reform by “leveraging the social ties of school members who interact at the boundaries of role groups” (Jean-Marie, Ruffin, & Burr, as cited in Jean-Marie & Curry, 2012, p. 290). Cross-boundary leadership not only considers cooperative efforts between educators in a building or district, it brings together “community leaders, leaders on the ground, and leaders in the middle to work collaboratively within the educational process” (Jean-Marie & Curry, 2012, pp. 290-291). These leaders represent the school, local government, and civic, corporate and agency leaders (community leaders), organizational managers with the “ability to build an infrastructure across institutions and organizations” (leaders in the middle), and practitioners and community members at school sites who “know local issues and have the skills to build relationships and connect residents to resources and opportunities” (leaders on the ground) (Blank, Berg, & Melaville, 2006, p. vi). In cross-boundary leadership, the structural features of the model (Figure 1) create processes to invite and allow teachers, parents, community members and other constituents to support and advance shared educational goals. Shared influence and responsibility, the normative conditions of cross-boundary leadership, refer to an individual’s “capacity to inspire, motivate, and guide leadership in others to reach desired goals” (Jean-Marie & Curry, 2012, p. 292).

Cross-boundary leadership, as a concept, emerged from research on the implementation and effectiveness of the community school model (Adams & Jean-Marie, 2010; Blank et al., 2006; Green & Gooden, 2014); however, it has implications for all school leaders because of the increasing need to facilitate and sustain partnerships between schools and communities. EDLE 6633 School/Community Collaboration was developed with the undergirding philosophy of the leader’s responsibility to create cultures that promote and facilitate partnerships within their buildings/districts. This discussion is timely because current conditions in high poverty neighborhoods (Casto, 2016) and current financial crises facing many districts (Leachman & Mai, 2014)) highlight the importance of leadership that crosses boundaries to meet the needs of students.

Figure 1



Cross-Boundary Leadership (Adams & Jean-Marie, 2011)

Methods

The intent of this study was to assess course effectiveness in preparing course completers and instilling the skills and dispositions necessary to facilitate successful, sustainable collaborative partnerships with education stakeholders and communities. This qualitative case study was designed to gain an understanding of the participants' experiences in partnership efforts after course completion (Bamberger, Rugh, & Mabry, 2006). The case study design provided an opportunity to study the complex phenomenon of leadership dispositions within the context of schools and districts after the completion of EDLE 6633 (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This exploratory case study (Yin, 2003) met the criteria of investigating "a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 25). Yin (2003) described an exploratory case study as an investigation used to link program implementation with program effects. This study seeks to understand the influence of EDLE 6633 on partnership efforts. Case study methodology, when applied correctly, becomes a valuable method to evaluate the effectiveness of programs (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2003).

Data Sources and Collection

The population for this study included completers of the EDLE 6633 School/Community Collaboration course at Oklahoma State University. These students represented a diverse group of educational leaders across the State of Oklahoma. Emails were sent in the fall of 2014 to sixty-one students who took the course, taught by 3 faculty members during 5 semesters over 5 years (Spring 2010-Spring 2014), requesting their participation in the online Qualtrics survey that served as the initial data source (Appendix A). The survey contained open-ended questions regarding former students' perceptions of skills and attitudes developed during the course and

their perceptions of the effectiveness and sustainability of partnership efforts since course completion. To provide triangulation of data and to enhance data credibility (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2003), course evaluations, project documents collected during the 5 semesters, and district websites and school/community correspondence served as additional data sources.

Data Analysis

Following data collection, we independently reviewed survey data to identify recurring themes in participant responses. Although we were specifically interested in identifying examples of shared influence and shared responsibility in collaborative efforts with parents, families, and community, we remained open to the possibility of “discovered” themes. Utilizing the technique of categorical aggregation (Stake, 1995), we then pooled our individual lists and negotiated one list of recurring themes. This technique encouraged integration of data sources, ensuring that data were converged, to gain an understanding of the overall case rather than various parts of the case (Baxter & Jack, 2008). We categorized interview data using open coding to identify themes or patterns in the responses that might lead to a better understanding of how EDLE 6633 influenced students to develop collaborative endeavors emphasizing shared influence and responsibility. This understanding can also lead to further insight into how the course can be improved to meet the philosophical objectives of the course.

Findings

Twenty completers of EDLE 6633 responded to the invitation to participate in the study, representing a 33 percent response rate. Participants comprised an equal representation of each of the three instructors with a larger number of participants (5) from the most recent semester that the course was offered (Spring 2014). The greater level of participation from more recent completers was somewhat expected; however, it is a potential limitation to this study because these course completers may not have had adequate time (only part of one academic year) to fully understand the sustainability of their partnership efforts. However, since 15 respondents had completed the course from two to five years prior to the study, their responses provided insight into sustainability of partnership efforts.

Student Perceptions of the Course on Their Own Collaborative Efforts

Findings from the study indicate positive perceptions of the influence of the course on completer ability to develop sustainable school/family/community collaboration. Findings suggest that course completers recognize and emphasize the importance of partnerships, and they emphasize effective communication as an essential skill in partnership efforts. Responses indicated that students perceived communication and collaboration as interwoven skills. Respondents recognized these skills as “key factors in furthering educational goals.” One respondent asserted, “Collaboration is key in implementing any changes in educational goals. A school cannot make decisions without a proper amount of communication.” Another stated, “It [the course] helped to reinforce my beliefs on school-community collaboration and communication while also helping to expand my knowledge base on this topic.”

Although the course positively influenced course completers’ perceptions of their competency to facilitate partnerships, the influence differed depending upon students’ prior

experience in leadership positions. For example, one student responded, “As an experienced public school principal, none of the information in this course was entirely new to me,” and another indicated the course “did not dramatically influence my beliefs.” However, the latter concluded, “The course opened my mind to other ways to incorporate parents and the community in the work that we do in educating children.” For veteran administrators, the course confirmed their commitments to partnership efforts and provided new ideas for generating effective partnerships. The sentiment expressed by another student seemed to echo those of the majority: “If you did not understand the importance of school/community collaboration and communication prior to the course, one would surely see the significance and power of the synergistic relationship after the course.” In contrast, students who did not have extensive experience in leadership positions recognized a significant influence of the course on their perceptions about the importance of partnership efforts. One course completer stated, “I had been a classroom teacher for almost 2 decades, and this course broadened my perspective of education to include viewpoints from administrators, families, and communities. I had never thought of education that way.”

Practical application of newly gained knowledge in the course was pivotal to increasing skill level among course completers. As expressed by three respondents, the course “help[ed] me practice with the process of creating school and community collaboration,” and “gave me additional ideas and insights on ways to improve our approach” as well as “various strategies and ideas on how to involve the community in what we are doing at school.” Another explained that the course had practical application because it required students to “dial down to the school site level and consider strategies and issues at an operational level of a school, program, classroom, and patron perspective. Sometimes you have to go back to looking at trees rather than [at] the forest.”

One student noted the value of the heterogeneous composition of the class itself: “Collaboration and discussion within the class was very beneficial as we were all from different schools and had different experiences.” Another student commented, “It gave me an actual framework of ideas to incorporate more parental involvement.” The value of acquiring “ideas for increasing family and community engagement” was reiterated by several, as was the belief that “collaboration among school stakeholders is key...to build/solidify community relationships.”

Student Perceptions of Course Project

The purpose of the major course requirement, the community collaboration project, was to give students “hands-on” opportunities to plan and implement collaborative projects and draw conclusions relevant to the study of communication and collaboration. This project in itself is a collaborative effort, in that students work in groups of 3 to 4 class “partners” to design and implement their projects; working “alone” is not permissible. Projects completed during the study time frame varied in scope and size as well as by topic area; examples of project areas and programs developed during the course included collaborative efforts to facilitate school/grade transitions, collaborating with parents and the community to reduce drug use in school and community, families learning algebra together (FLAT), a Laws of Life essay, involving parents in a high school dropout prevention program, and Spotlight for Kindergarten.

Former students saw the project as one “requiring collaboration among team members and simulating the cooperation needed for an authentic school task.” One student described the project as “very beneficial!” and explained,

Our cohort was made up of a few administrators with some administrative experience and a majority of classroom teachers who wanted to move into administration. Real-world projects gave us the opportunity to practice our administrative skills in a classroom setting.

The majority of students responded that the project was “helpful,” “beneficial,” “offered practical experience,” and “provided confidence and new ideas.” One student stated, “I benefited because I applied some of the ideas that I learned in the process at [name of school], and from what I learned from others and the instructor.” One respondent summarized the experience,

It [the course project] helped me to think about the larger context in my current role and how community influences school practices. I am now more thoughtful and purposeful when involving the community and family members.

Sustainability of Partnership Efforts

Critical to the success of collaboration are the efforts made to sustain partnerships (Epstein, 2013). Participant responses indicated understanding of sustainability, stating the course “reinforced how important the community relationship can be for the success of projects and initiatives as well as potential funding sources.” One respondent asserted the course was “a great reminder that relationships are the foundation of all partnerships or joint ventures.”

One way to understand sustainability of their efforts was to gain an understanding of whether or not their projects developed in the course were implemented, and if so, if they were continuing. Responses varied concerning whether or not the course project was actually implemented and sustained in the school. One respondent stated, “We continued our project in pieces.” Another explained that the project her group had developed had been implemented at several school sites in several districts. She explained, “Our group project focused on implementing social media and school communication systems at my school. Two group members’ schools implemented a mass communication system, and my school implemented a Twitter account.” A teacher who was team leader in her school explained the course project “influenced how my teachers communicated with parents, so it was carried out until the end of the school year.” One noted the course project helped her know how to plan and implement another, related, school/community partnership project. Another responded, “This project was very beneficial! The school site is still continuing the project.” In sum, approximately half of the respondents (11) indicated that the projects they had developed in the course were actually implemented in their districts and the projects had been sustained through the time of data collection. Four additional respondents indicated the project had been implemented but was not sustained at the time of data collection, and five respondents indicated the project that they had developed had not been implemented at all.

Another finding from this study was that many of the participants mentioned challenges to the sustainability of collaborative efforts. Respondents noted various aspects that made sustainability of collaboration difficult: lack of time, scheduling problems, low participation by parents, difficulty to effect buy-in or involvement, language barriers, poor communication, lack of trust, and apathy. However, participation in the course encouraged them to think deeply about some of the challenges to partnership efforts. One individual noted the importance of “making time to build relationships, the foundation of all successful partnerships.” Another attributed the lack of participation to prior experiences, stating, “Some parents had difficult school experiences and thus do not want anything to do with their children or school. However, parents innately

want a better life for their children despite their own school experiences."

Trust was a factor mentioned, not only from the parental perspective of prior experience, but also from that of administrators. One course completer noted, "Many administrators fear parental involvement because they worry that parents will become too involved and demanding. Possibly trying to interfere with how the school is run, etc. However, this course helped me to understand that we can't let that fear keep us from involving parents." Summarizing the need for total stakeholder involvement, one student noted the difficulty of obtaining the support of other teachers and administrators. She stated,

Collaboration and communication needs to be part of the school culture and [I need to] support multiple school personnel to be effective in the community. Collaboration is not perceived as being sincere if there are only a handful of school staff participating and promoting this idea. As a leader, I have to encourage all staff to understand the importance [of partnerships].

Although, as one student noted, challenges in sustaining collaborative efforts exist, particularly "finding time to meet and showing the community tangible results of their collaboration with the school," others addressed the commitment needed by all stakeholders. For example, one participant stated, "The most difficult part of collaboration with the community is the 'buy-in' to what you are trying to accomplish in the district. But, if the community is always aware of what you are doing, they are more likely to support you and your endeavors." One respondent reminded us that community members are potential advocates for schools. "Working with community members is really quite easy. I have never been turned down by community members when schools and students are involved." The fact that these course completers recognized challenges and also recognized potential approaches to address the challenges indicates their persistence in partnership efforts was influenced by participation in the course.

Shared Influence and Responsibility

Analyzing the findings of this study through the theoretical lens of cross boundary leadership was central to understanding partnership efforts. Most notably, findings support the normative conditions of shared influence and shared responsibility necessary for successful partnership efforts. Respondents stated that the course encouraged them to re-examine their beliefs, particularly in regard to their ability, as educational leaders, to influence multiple stakeholder groups (parents, community members, business leaders) to become involved in educating children. One primary emphasis among course completers was the realization that educational leaders have the primary role in building and sustaining partnerships with stakeholders. One course completer emphasized her ability to influence partnership efforts by stating, "This course caused me to grow in my belief in the need to as include as many stakeholders as possible to facilitate student success." Another stated, "I gained a wider perspective on communication and collaboration and on my role in allowing others, or even expecting others, to be more involved in the process." Expanding on the diversity of potential involvement opportunities and her responsibility to facilitate those opportunities, one explained, "It opened my eyes to the fact there are many avenues through which collaboration with community members must take place. I must look for those opportunities." Another replied, "The course opened my mind to other ways to incorporate parents in the work that we do in educating their children."

Respondents emphasized an understanding of expanded repertoire of ways to involve stakeholders. For one, the course "provided more knowledge to recognize partnership

opportunities”; for another, the course provided “an actual framework of ideas to incorporate more parental and community involvement.” Commenting on previous involvement in collaborative efforts, one respondent stated the course “gave me additional ideas and insights on ways to improve our approach at [name of school].” Relating content to practical application, one student wrote, “This course influenced me by giving me various strategies and ideas on how to involve the community in what we are doing at school. Involving families in the school setting is tremendously beneficial to the success of our school.”

Shared Responsibility. Participant responses indicated an understanding of shared responsibility among stakeholders. This course and the required project helped one student “identify areas that I need to work in. I need to expect others to be involved.” For another, it helped to develop intentional actions: “I have consciously tried to build relationships with school stakeholders, but now I understand that we all have a role in educating children.” Yet another stated, “The course made me realize how important it is to start from the ‘grass roots’ of developing cross-sectional committees to bring ideas up from the bottom so they will have the support of parents and teachers.” Another stated, “I realize now that the best school practices are supported by community members. The actions of a school cannot be driven from the top down, but everyone has to be brought along.” This statement served as an example of this leader’s understanding of her influence in partnership efforts and in her understanding of shared responsibility among stakeholders to bring out the best in students.

Findings from this study undergird the understanding that for collaborative efforts to be successful, each partner in the relationship must have an understanding of each other. According to Goulet, Krentz, and Christiansen (2001), “Collaboration is challenging because the human element of social interaction is a major part of every collaborative project” (p. 331). For one student, the course instigated consideration of not only diverse activities, but also diverse constituents: “I now thoughtfully consider avenues to include various stakeholder groups from students to staff to families to the community.” Another was inspired by the results of collaborative efforts by “actually going to the parent health fair [project activity]...seeing families of many different nationalities and ethnic backgrounds intermingle in a casual setting.” Another replied, “It helped me to think about the larger context in my current role and how the community actually influences school practices. I am now more thoughtful and purposeful when involving the community and family members.” Most respondents seemed to share the view of one who stated, “It (partnership efforts) always changes as you learn and gain perspective. My approach in my doctoral path is to be a scholar practitioner, so I always look for ways to implement what we discuss and cover.” This participant emphasized the fact that understanding the needs and interests of her diverse community will be a focus for her in the future. One participant wrote that the course raised an “awareness of the great diversity in our district and what is not really talked about (growing and changing demographics).” Another commented,

When dealing with the community, you must keep in mind that not all members have children in school. They may be business leaders, supporters, and sometimes detractors of what you are doing. While communicating with these groups, it is necessary to stay open minded.

Additional Findings

Because case study methodology can be a valuable method to evaluate the effectiveness of programs (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2003), we gained valuable insight concerning the

effectiveness of the course, EDLE 6633 *School/Community Collaboration*, through this case study. Findings indicate that course completers were more aware of the communication necessary and the importance of collaborative efforts. Most participants in this study also expressed confidence in their abilities to promote and facilitate sustainable partnership efforts. Additionally, while the shared influence they perceived was primarily expressed as understanding of the influence they have on partnership efforts, findings from this study indicate that the foundational philosophical goals of the course of promoting an understanding of shared influence and shared responsibility are met. However, some responses indicated need for continued course development.

The first area of development includes expanding understandings of shared influence beyond the assumption of the influence of the educational leader on collaborative efforts. Indeed, all stakeholders in education exert influence over the outcomes that a school experiences. While educational leaders and teachers may perceive that they have the greatest influence on educational outcomes because of their positions in the educational context, other stakeholders including parents and community members also influence student outcomes. Our findings indicate there is a need to expand understandings of shared influence in the course.

Other findings in the study indicate the course may not have been as valuable to some students who took the course as it was to others. For example, one respondent stated that the course “had no influence on my work practices at all”; however, this participant further explained, “collaborative efforts have always been a primary focus of mine as an educational leader.” Another participant commented that the “foundation of the course was good,” but the methods were “too heavily focused on elementary education.” These comments indicate that the course needs to be adapted to meet the needs of a more diverse set of educational leaders (e.g. those who are veteran practicing administrators and all levels of P-12 leadership). Another participant in the study indicated, “It wasn’t until I was in a different position that I was able to utilize the community and their input” further emphasizing the need to understand specific student work contexts in course objectives.

Researchers gleaned additional insight concerning the effectiveness of the course project in meeting course objectives. One respondent stated, “It [the course project] was not extremely beneficial for me because this was not an area of research or interest for me,” and another, “[I] do not remember it [the course project]” indicating the need to tailor the project to advance more specific application to individual student contexts in which they work. Further, concerning the course project, one respondent commented that the project was “in another school district,” and another “I am an outsider of the school system” indicating, while a group project meets the objective of encouraging collaborative work within the course, it may have lost application value if group members worked in separate districts. Findings indicate implementation of the course project added significant value to the course. Therefore, allowing students to work with others who work in the same district or in similar contexts is an important component for successful implementation of the course project.

Summary of Findings

Course completers reported having developed new perspectives regarding the generative aspects of stakeholder involvement. Students reported difficulty with the time commitment of collaboration and identified initial perceptions of partnership efforts as something “extra” added to their daily list of responsibilities. However, students reported a change in perception of the

importance of partnership efforts as they progressed through the course. Students expressed a belief that partnerships are central to their leadership efforts to improve education. Further, they believe success of district leadership efforts is influenced by skills/abilities in partnership building. In terms of practice, survey responses revealed a high level of interaction with stakeholders. These educational leaders evidenced collaborative endeavors with parents, families, and communities. Some projects that began as course projects were sustained; others led to new avenues of collaboration.

In sum, EDLE 6633 impressed students with the importance of stakeholder collaboration and provided the impetus for students to seek ways to collaborate with community. The course also promoted understandings of shared influence and shared responsibility; however, attention is needed concerning how to expand course completers' perceptions of influence beyond that of school personnel. Additionally, several deficiencies were noted in the course indicating a need to address the needs of a diverse group of educational leaders (beginning to veteran; PK-Secondary). Also, collaborative approaches to the group project are beneficial to the extent that the project has applicability to each group member's specific school context.

Discussion

The benefits of parent involvement in school are well documented, and the importance of partnerships between schools, families, and communities cannot be over-emphasized. Partnership benefits include the promotion of self-regulatory skills, academic achievement gains, overall grade improvement, and higher graduation rates (Epstein, 2013; Jeynes, 2012; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Xu, Kusher, Benson, Mudrey-Camino, & Steiner, 2010; Wilder, 2013). Additionally, as schools face increasing challenges due to changes in student demographics and community context, partnerships between schools and communities gain importance as a resource to help educators meet educational goals (Green, 2015). However, partnerships between schools and communities are not a natural result of the way that schools typically operate (Coyote, 2007; Blankstein & Noguera, 2015). Thus, educational leaders, particularly those in high poverty communities, must receive training focused on how to facilitate connections between schools and communities to meet the needs of underserved children and families (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Epstein, 2013; Jean-Marie, Ruffin, & Burr, 2010; Blankstein & Noguera, 2015).

The premise of EDLE 6633 is that current approaches to leadership must emphasize a shared leadership approach for school improvement. Educational and social problems require collaborative approaches that "cross structural boundaries and create a network of shared responsibility among the different spheres of influences in children's lives" (Jean-Marie & Curry, 2012, p. 290). Therefore, collectively, as leaders from all stakeholder groups work together to develop and share new ideas to promote student learning, a climate of shared purpose, teamwork, and mutual respect evolves (Boris-Schacter & Langer, 2006).

Our findings support this approach to leadership training and suggest that educational leaders who receive specialized training for collaboration between the school and community reap benefits that influence their belief and practice. For example, many students in the course stated that the course motivated them to emphasize collaboration as a means to reach educational goals. Even those students who entered the class with an understanding of the importance of collaborative efforts gleaned information from the course about practical ways to target their efforts. Additionally, both course content and the classroom environment were important

influences on student belief and practice. For example, as students met together in class, they began to exchange ideas and share experiences, and a rich culture of shared understanding and creativity emerged. Ideas and experiences were shared among class members, and these ideas generated deeper understandings of course material and facilitated the application of course learning objectives. However, findings from this course suggest the need to more closely align the course with student level of experience and educational context in which they work. Modifying the course to build upon understandings of veteran administrators who “understand the importance of collaborative efforts” would make the course more meaningful to those students. This goal may be accomplished by recognizing the ways in which course objectives, to enhance student understandings of shared influence and shared responsibility, were not met. What did not seem to happen in this course was a shift in the “balance of power” among educational leaders and other stakeholder groups. Participants in this study continued to see themselves as the primary influencer in collaborative efforts and in enhancing student outcomes. These findings indicate that a greater emphasis is needed on the influence that other stakeholders have in student educational outcomes and how to leverage that influence to benefit students. Additionally, increasing leader capacity to promote shared responsibility among all stakeholder groups is another important finding from this study.

Findings from this study also suggest implications for direct application of skills learned in the course through course projects. The collaborative aspect of the culminating group project supports the philosophical foundations of the course; however, individuals within groups benefitted differently depending upon the focus of each project. For example, when groups consisted of students from different districts, one district from each group was chosen as the focus for the project. As expected, students from the district in each group where the project was focused indicated greater incidence of continuing project goals. However, group members in other districts did not necessarily replicate projects in their own districts, and these students indicated less emphasis on collaborative efforts compared to their colleagues. Therefore, findings from this study suggest a more focused approach to the culminating project is needed to provide opportunity for practical application for all students that can, potentially, motivate a sustained emphasis on collaboration. While the group aspect of the project seems to meet course objectives, modifying the assignment to make it applicable for all group members can more fully support course objectives and lead to sustained practice.

An additional finding from this study was the emphasis placed on awareness of diverse needs throughout stakeholder groups in the school and community. Findings from this study support the idea that understanding the community’s diverse cultural, social, and intellectual resources is the first step in developing, promoting, and sustaining positive relationships with families and caregivers. However, understandings do not happen without intentional, directed effort. Sustaining productive relationships with community partners takes not only dedication but also training to develop skills needed for building effective partnerships. Leadership preparation programs that emphasize collaborative efforts through courses designed specifically to develop those leadership skills offer promise for developing successful leaders for demands of the 21st century.

Limitations

There are several limitations that must be addressed in this study. The first limitation that has already been mentioned is the fact that a larger percentage of participants in the study (25%)

were course completers who had completed the course within the year before data collection. Their responses may not adequately represent sustainability of partnership efforts due to the limited amount of time between project implementation and data collection. Additionally, a 33% response rate is a limitation that must be addressed. There is a chance that course completers who responded to the survey were those that were most satisfied with the course, or respondents may have been course completers most interested in collaborative efforts in their districts. Further study is needed to gain a better understanding of the influence of the course on longer-term sustainability and to capture the perspectives of a larger percentage of course completers. Finally, the study was conducted by faculty who taught the EDLE 6633 *School/Community Collaboration* course. As researchers, they viewed this study as a means to gather important feedback concerning the effectiveness of the course. Care was taken to listen to and represent the voices of participants in the study (course completers) from a position of researcher neutrality. However, unrecognized bias may have influenced results of this study.

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