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Going Against the Grain of Accountability Policy: Leadership Preparation for Using Data to Promote Socially Just Outcomes

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Abstract

Leadership preparation programs are in transition as scholars seek to determine more sophisticated approaches in developing leaders for the increasing demands of accountability policy. This critical conceptual analysis focuses on leadership preparation for the socialization of school leaders. It is intended to reframe current perspectives about data use and provides recommendations for improving leadership development for socially just outcomes. Critical perspectives towards improving leadership preparation programs through questioning disposition and skill development might serve to improve preparation programs by addressing the more nuanced elements of leadership undergirding school reform.

Keywords*: principal preparation, leadership preparation, critical analysis of leadership programs, case study approach, data-based decision-making*

Introduction

Schools have changed dramatically in the wake of No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and other accountability, equity, and performance incentive programs and legislation intended to improve the academic achievement of American students. Educational administration and leadership preparation programs are in transition as scholars seek to determine more sophisticated and applicable approaches to leadership that provide future educational leaders the disposition and skills necessary to adjust to increasing demands (Forsyth, 1999; Griffiths, Stout & Forsyth, 1988; Jackson & Kelly, 2002; Jean-Marie & Normore, 2010; Young, Peterson & Short, 2002). Additionally, many of these preparation programs seek to incorporate increased opportunities for leadership socialization through greater theory to practice connections and on-site internships and practicum opportunities to address role conceptualization and the challenges associated with transition into leadership roles (Jean-Marie & Normore, 2010; Perry & Imig, 2010).

This critical conceptual article focuses on leadership preparation for the socialization of school leaders. It is intended to reframe current perspectives about data use and provides recommendations for improving leadership preparation for socially just outcomes. Critical perspectives towards improving leadership preparation programs through questioning disposition and skill development might serve to improve these programs by addressing the more nuanced elements of leadership undergirding school reform. Leadership preparation must respond to the complexity of the increasing demands placed upon educational leaders and the intense scrutiny they face as principals and superintendents.

A Critique of Data-Driven Leadership

In an era of research-based design, "what works" clearinghouses, and the overwhelming responsibility school leaders have to use data to *demonstrate* achievement, understanding the use of data is essential. However, data-driven leadership, a critical component of leadership in today's schools, is often discussed yet rarely applied at the preparation program level to determine what it means in practice or how it can be done effectively (Corrigan, Grove & Vincent, 2011; Kowalski, Lasley & Mahoney, 2008). When aspiring leaders complete their preparation programs they are not likely afforded the time (or have sophisticated the skills) necessary to think critically about the process of data collection and analysis and how this process links theory and practice.

English (2006) argues that the "quest for a 'knowledge base' in educational administration resulting in the construction of national standards for preparing school leaders has brought with it an unexpected downside" (p. 461). This includes the assumption that there is a standard knowledge base tied to leadership as a static social system, limiting the responsibilities of school leaders and minimizing socialization experiences related to critical thinking and improved practice (English, 2006). In other words, traditional educational leadership preparation programs promote a standard orientation to leadership devoid of crucial mentoring, socialization, creativity, or critical thinking opportunities. Leadership preparation focused on innovative uses for data can lead to greater competency and ease of socialization into the field (Browne-Ferrigno, & Muth, 2004; Daresh, 2004).

One challenge found in leadership preparation is that there is often a discrepancy between the scholarly base for coursework and the day-to-day reality of leadership practice with few on-site socialization experiences directly related to data use and analysis. School leaders would be better prepared to meet the needs of the complex system in which they worked if they were provided the opportunity to develop necessary "data-driven decision-making" dispositions and skills in a guided format (Corrigan, Grove, & Vincent, 2011). Improving the quality and applicability of field experiences that provide aspiring educational leaders the opportunity for socialization into

the practice of using data for socially just outcomes provides new possibilities as they proactively envision leadership in the future.

Background Literature

Critics of modern leadership preparation programs argue that these programs are not intended to promote critical thinking, creativity, or prepare future school leaders "to create democratic communities motivated by inquiry" (Breault, 2010, p. 293). While empirical evidence substantiates the claim that principals have an impressive effect on schools (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Ogawa & Hart, 1993; Stark-Price, Munoz, Winter & Petresko, 2007) it also supports critical claims that "preparing them within the prescribed ways of being necessary for today's policies makes them keepers within a troubling ideological empire" (Breault, 2010, p. 292). In other words, for schools to continue operating in the narrow and prescribed manner dictated by current education legislation with buy in from teachers, parents, and community members, school leaders must be the sturdy, standards-based anchors to which each of these stakeholder will tie their ships in a storm (Apple, 2004). Often, these anchors are tethered by school or achievement data that are presumed to be strong and reliable.

Using Data as a Function of Leadership

Using data to make decisions that will improve students' academic achievement may initially seem outside the scope of the abovementioned troubling ideological empire. However, assessing student achievement in the context of data-driven school leadership is problematic for a number of reasons. First, there is the matter of defining academic achievement. As Corrigan, Grove, and Vincent (2011) have asked; who decides what is or is not achievement? What is the cut line between achievement and non-achievement and what data should be used for indicators of achievement? Second, is there an actual correlation between the data school leaders are asked to collect for compliance with policies and the outcome for which these data are used as evidence (Linn, 2003)? Third, do educational leadership preparation programs promote critical assessment of why certain data are collected, which data best inform systemic educational improvement (Boris-Schacter & Langer, 2002), or what data are missing beyond the prescribed state and federal policy-driven accountability data? Might this missing data provide a better starting point for making decisions? Most importantly, is data-driven leadership relevant if the above issues are not addressed?

Shifting uses of Data for Accountability

While using data to understand indicators of progress is not new, scholars can easily pinpoint the early 1980's and the release of *A Nation at Risk* as the seismic catalyst that thrust America's declining education system into the spotlight of ever changing reform strategies (Bell, 1993; Bracey, 2003; Kowalski, Lasley & Mahoney, 2008). Finn (1991) argues that this was *not* the

monumental moment it was believed to be, but rather, solidified a long-standing movement from equity to excellence spanning more than a decade. Regardless of the validity of the report or its perceived bombshell content, it quickly spawned multiple reports warning of the detrimental effects, both current and future, that a mediocre and declining system of education would have on the U.S. economy (Bruggencate, Lyten, Scheerens, & Sleegers, 2012; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Jazzar & Algozzie, 2007). Despite any real evidence to support these dismal claims, influential political figures quickly accepted them as fact (Bruggencate, Lyten, Scheerens, & Sleegers, 2012; Hawley, 1988; Jazzar & Algozzie, 2007). The result of this was a host of mandates including increasing graduation requirements and the number of school days, increasing licensing requirements for teachers to include additional continuing education, and shifted the primary function of the educator from teaching to complying with mandates (Kowalski, 2003; Kowalski, Lasley & Mahoney, 2008; St. John & Clements, 2004). These mandates went largely ignored and educators continued to make pedagogical decisions behind closed doors that aligned with the values they acquired through socialization for the profession and their workplace (Fullan, 2001; Hall & Hord, 2001).

Policymakers began taking notice of empirical research critical of the unrealized expectations of mandates enforced as a result of *A Nation at Risk* beginning in the 1990's (Kowalski, Lasley & Mahoney, 2008). They developed a new strategy for school improvement that focused less on students and teachers and more on organizational culture and school governance (Elmore, 1987; Parker, 1987; Prince, 1989). Returning autonomy and decision-making authority to local school boards and administrators was key to this strategy because blanket mandates drafted by legislators held little promise for meeting the unique needs of individual districts (Saban, 1997). This strategy included improving leadership preparation programs as well. Policymakers held that rigorous standards in preparation and licensing were crucial and that school leaders "had to assume greater responsibility for individual practice and overall school productivity" (Kowalski, Lasley & Mahoney, 2008, p. 7).

Modern educational leadership has become defined by accountability and data use due to the sweeping philosophical shift found in the wake of NCLB. One of the primary successes of this shift is the disaggregation of subgroup data that allows for greater understanding of student achievement. However, as Breault (2011) noted, policymakers, preparation programs, and school leaders may in fact perpetuate school decline by adhering to a narrow definition of data-driven leadership. Preparation programs are in a unique position to provide future school leaders with the knowledge and experiences that will stretch them beyond the status quo of policy data rhetoric and help them develop the skills and dispositions that will support them in leading for meaningful school improvement. Rather than later discover leadership preparation programs were working toward perpetuating yet another

ineffective wave of education reform, these programs need to incorporate a more thoughtful approach to data use. As McCarthy (2002) warns

> *We should learn from and build on the past but not be confined by prior practices, especially by practices that have excluded individuals and groups from the discourse because of their characteristics or perspectives. Adhering to traditional practices can stymie creativity and progress. Yet, just because ideas or practices are new does not mean they are better. Exchanging one orthodoxy for another does not necessarily mean that we are moving forward (p. 201).*

Socialization and Peer Coaching

Preparing leaders for the demands of a new community of practice, or socialization, as they move from the classroom to administration has been a priority for leadership preparation programs (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Daresh, 2004; Normore, 2007). Driven by new professional standards and heightened expectations (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996; National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2002), programs have redesigned both curricula and delivery format for aspiring leaders (Coleman, Copeland, & Adams, 2001; Jackson & Kelly, 2002; Murphy & Forsyth, 1999). In practice, this includes strong theory-based instruction that is tightly connected to opportunities for students to apply "newly acquired knowledge to authentic administrative practice during carefully developed and monitored field-based experiences" (Brown-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004, p. 468) followed by opportunities for reflection on those experiences with mentors and peers (Muth, 2002). Compounding the need to improve leadership preparation programs is the shortage of highly qualified principals and superintendents across the U.S. (Normore, 2007). How can we make a sustainable shift in leadership preparation without taking into consideration the limited availability of talented educators willing to transition from teaching to administration?

One strategy for remedying the problem of recruiting and retaining qualified individuals can be found in urban school models, wherein organizations focus on developing emerging leaders from within the organizational structure and mentoring them through the transition to leadership with sustained professional development, access to resources, and authentic leadership opportunities (Gilber, Carter, & Goldsmith, 2000; Normore, 2007). This strategy is promising given that a significant number of practicing administrators are leaving the profession (Daresh, 2004), and "fewer educators [are] showing any interest in pursuing careers as school administrators" (p. 496). When educational organizations grow their own leaders, there are both "implicit and explicit opportunities and experiences for professional and organizational socialization to unfold" (Normore, 2007, p. 2). Interesting opportunities arise when conceptualizing the ways in which internally recruited aspiring leaders, mentored and socialized from within their professional organizations, are coupled with guidance from leadership

preparation programs that facilitate opportunities for peer coaching from similarly situated aspiring leaders. In other words, perhaps school-university partnerships might be re-worked to better prepare future leaders through multi-level mentoring and peer coaching intentionally designed with the existing school community in mind from the beginning?

In the current data-driven educational culture marked by increasing pressure on school leaders for accountability, it is erroneous to presume that learning how to use data for decision-making is a normative element of on-the-job training exercises (Corrigan, Grove, & Vincent, 2011). Greater attention to exposure and use of data through leadership preparation coursework coupled with the peer-coaching practice embedded within organizations that grow their own leaders provides greater opportunity to improve students' sensemaking and provides the venue for socialization to support them in their roles as educational leaders (Brown-Ferrigmo & Muth, 2004; Normore, 2007). This strategy is not without predictable problems such as the potential for students to become dependent on their mentors (Daresh, 2004), however if carefully constructed, these socialization relationships have the potential to mutually benefit both the mentee and mentor while improving and sustaining leadership within an educational organization (Kram, 1985).

Re-framing Leadership Preparation for Meaningful Data Use

The first step in re-framing leadership for meaningful data use requires an agreed upon conceptual definition for the key word "meaningful". For the purpose of this article, the term "meaningful" encompasses the notion that collected data are relevant, targeted, and used to answer specific questions that promote school improvement and socially just outcomes. To determine the degree to which data are meaningful, leadership preparation programs should move beyond the aesthetics of stressing using data to make organizational decisions and make distinct connections between the "what", "why" and "how" of data. In other words, provide specific space for critical reflection and discussion about how students envision data-driven decision-making and interrogate issues of meaning and import, particularly in regard to leadership for socially just outcomes in practice. When it comes to issues of practical application, students should be have clear understanding of what questions they are trying to answer. They should be able to understand and articulate why data-driven decision-making is critical for making decisions, and how they should determine which data answers their questions. To do so, they must consider alternative data that might better inform inquiry, and regularly engage in the actual process of analyzing and interpreting data through a critically reflective lens.

Schools are not lacking in available data; however, the utility of the data can be questioned with regard to meaningful decision-making. Providing school leaders the opportunity to explore the myriad of data available and encouraging them to engage in activities to facilitate greater understanding of which data are appropriate to specific situations or questions fosters

critical thinking. Students should question if the data they currently use are meaningful or merely an arm of education policy accountability? Meaningful data that might be used to meet students' needs are not typically the data by which the schools are being held accountable. The narrow lens valued from top-down policy mandates further narrows the opportunity for school leaders to engage in dynamic multi-dimensional approaches toward addressing community and public good because these leaders are focused on meeting accountability mandates.

Adjusting the Lens for Improved Data-Driven Leadership Preparation

Implementing programs and innovations for change is essential for improving school outcomes, however, on a practical level, these programs and innovative changes are met with skepticism and wary resistance (Evans, 1996). Often, the changes that would need to be made in response to more meaningful data collection and analysis in schools would be rejected at the building and district levels. Rapidly shifting federal and state policy mandates intended to improve student achievement has created a culture of cynicism and fear of change (Brealt, 2010; Corrigan, Grove, & Vincent, 2011; Evans, 1996). Further, trust is often not present in schools due to punitive and critical outside influences stemming from policy initiatives (Forsyth, Adams, & Hoy, 2011). In this environment, it is understandable why school leaders might limit innovative thought aligned with more sophisticated approaches to data use. Leaders might reject complicating an already skeptical culture with incorporating more meaningful data use when the uni-dimensional approach found in NCLB, while lacking utility, is complicated enough. Moreover, policy seems to promote changing for the sake of change as accountability measures are shifted and states implement different structures to measure success. This results in a wide range of reactive measures from districts and schools creating environments lacking sustainable focus and direction. The more this happens, the more teachers, administrators, parents, and community members feel that any change will hinder rather than help (Corrigan, Grove, & Vincent, 2011; Evans, 1996).

Re-framing Data-Driven Leadership Through Socialization

Coursework and course embedded activities might reframe data-driven leadership to promote structured socialization. Students would benefit from greater practice at understanding and using data before it was necessitated in their professional roles. Proper training and making the case that understanding data will work to the leaders' advantage would pave the way for it becoming a positive habit. Current leadership preparation programs include courses that encourage students to think critically about data use, however there is little time for putting coursework in action through sustained, program spanning, faculty-guided activities. Data-driven decision-making tends to be something discussed and briefly practiced in class then left as on the job training once educational leadership students earn certification (Corrigan, Grove, & Vincent, 2011). Students would benefit

from courses to incorporating greater opportunities to "play" with data and different ways to use it while they had a faculty member present for feedback. Leadership preparation ought to foster proactive dispositions and skills necessary for effectively communicating data results to *begin* critical discussions rather than *conclusively* rate past performance.

Growth vs. Change

Student voice and practitioner concerns merge as practitioners enter in to leadership preparation programs. Issues of school reform and systemic improvement require a great deal of change, which can be daunting. Framing data-driven leadership in terms of change serves to further erect psychological barriers where none need exist. Data-driven leadership framed in terms of professional growth would better guide leaders as they took the lessons from coursework and applied them in the field. If schools are growing, change is inevitable. Often times, however, there are varying degrees of growth occurring in a school community. If the administrators are growing at a much greater rate that the staff, or vice versa, frustration can occur. Equipping school leaders to use data meaningfully and communicate the purpose and process to school staff serves to support fostering staff willingness to embrace change.

Leadership Preparation and Socially Just Outcomes

Discrepancies arise when comparing school leaders' limited experiences with meaningful data use, analysis, and application from theory to practice with the policy and practice demands for data-driven leadership. Given the scrutiny educational leadership preparation programs and school leaders face regularly it is imperative that preparation programs work to improve the ways in which they work with students to promote date-driven leadership. Yet, attention to this problem will yield benign results until a critical lens is focused on it. One key question remains, do school leaders have the power to make meaningful changes even if they wanted to? This is a valid question in light of the narrow framework state and federal policies provide and the limited data each deems valuable. Leadership preparation programs are faced with the challenge of incorporating creative and innovative approaches to using data, developing opportunities for students to gain a better understanding of the "what", "why", and "how" of data collection, analysis, and application, and bridging theory and real world experiences of school leaders to promote school improvement.

Improving Theory to Practice Connections

As teachers endeavor to become principals or principals endeavor to become superintendents, they may take for granted that they will need to develop the skills and habits of interacting with data in new ways. For example, a third grade teacher might be adept at analyzing her students' reading proficiency scores and then developing individualized plans for remediation

where necessary, but she may find herself afloat in a sea of data as she transitions into a leadership role. As the school leader, she will have multiple data points from which to draw information to develop grade level and school-wide remediation plans. The data for these plans go beyond academic data to include critical non-academic data requiring careful analysis before developing an effective plan. If aspiring leaders are expected to enter into the field ready to use data in a meaningful way, faculty in preparation programs bear the responsibility to socialize them into the habits of practice that will create proficiency in data understanding and use. This begins with simply orienting students with the types of data available and the possible uses for each. Rather than espouse prescribed uses, faculty should encourage students to develop creative ways to use available data and expand students' thinking about what *other* data might be used to address complex problems.

The roles of principals and superintendents have shifted from being managers to being leaders in the wake of thirty years of educational improvement and reform legislation. Mandates for accountability and transparency require these school leaders to rely on school data to make good leadership decisions. To this end, school leaders must have opportunities to design and plan for staff professional development that transfers their leadership preparation experiences analyzing data into the real world of schools. Not only would this allow them to practice using data in innovative and creative ways, but would provide reflective time for them to think about how they will approach scheduling professional development content once they are fully immersed as a school leader. Leadership preparation faculty should also engage in reflective thought as to how they can incorporate and guide students into practicing habits of data-driven leadership in connection with all course activities; both in the classroom and in the field. When programs intentionally infuse tenets of data-driven leadership including hands on practice exercises, field experiences can be utilized to connect leadership theory with practical application in a more seamless manner.

Leadership for Social Justice

There is a greater imperative for expanding the ways in which faculty promote a more sophisticated approach to data-driven leadership and school leaders understand and use data for school improvement. Limiting the scope of data collection, analysis, and application to only that which is required as part of state and federal policy also limits to voices of many underrepresented voices in education. Leadership preparation programs are in a unique position to orient students to the types of data available and how those data can inform decision-making. Most students understand that the data collected to demonstrate effectiveness under NCLB (standardized test scores, attendance, behavior referrals, etc.) do not provide a full picture of school performance. What they may not be able to articulate is *why* the picture is left incomplete. Data will always be available; the key is to guide

students in developing understanding and using those data for academic achievement and systemic improvement.

Many programs and faculty in leadership preparation programs focus on social justice as a key outcome disposition in future school leaders. Leaders who demonstrate a commitment to social justice may be in a better position to promote systemic change through data-driven leadership because their staff may be more willing to buy in when change is needed. Change without a well-communicated purpose can frustrate and confuse people. Students must understand how to communicate meaningful data use within the context of their schools and districts and learn from other school leaders who model data-driven leadership for socially just outcomes because these leaders have a more sophisticated understanding of the diversity of needs exiting on-site. School leaders are better able to advocate for socially just outcomes when socialized to understand data as a tool of social justice. Data, when used effectively, becomes a catalyst for growth, which in turn, sparks change. Change is a necessary and inevitable component to meeting the needs of diverse learners. Rather than acting as "gatekeepers" to practice-based approaches for achieving socially just outcomes, faculty in leadership preparation programs should focus on providing students adequate opportunities to learn these valuable skills while taking advantage of the wide range of expertise leadership students bring to the program. Course content is enhanced and deepened when seasoned leaders provide less experienced participants with peer coaching and insight into ways in which they use data, both successfully and unsuccessfully. Students have multiple opportunities for growth between faculty expertise, peer coaching, classroom experiences, and field experiences. The result is that they are better able to examine data-driven leadership as a systemic approach to school improvement for socially just outcomes, not simply and examination of seemingly problematic parts.

Conclusion and Implications

School leaders have faced increased accountability coupled with intense scrutiny for improving student academic achievement. State and federal accountability policies have moved from a focus on teachers and students thirty years ago, through ineffective blanket mandates throughout the late 1980's and 1990's to school leadership accountability as a result of NCLB. School leaders must understand the nuances of data and how data can be used to inform leadership decisions. They must also understand that within a seemingly structured system of data collection and use, there are multiple ways to think creatively about data use and develop innovative approaches for tackling complex problems. Leadership preparation programs are uniquely positioned to provide educational leadership students the knowledge and skills needed to use data meaningfully while promoting leadership for social justice. As the profession of school leaders shifts, so must leadership preparation programs, however these shifts must reflect a commitment to challenging the narrowly defined parameters of accountability currently promoted by state and federal governing agencies. School leaders would

benefit from greater detailed attention to data-driven leadership, both in theory and practice to meet the changing demands of their schools and districts.

Leadership preparation programs cannot fully provide socialization for aspiring leaders, nor can internal organization-based leadership development programs fully orient future leaders to the nuances and theoretical underpinnings of data-driven decision-making. The two must determine an effective balance between theory and practice, taking into consideration that aspiring leaders need the time and space for guidance, reflection and sense-making prior to taking leadership roles. Accordingly, principals who are seeking advanced degrees or superintendant certification would benefit from the same socialization for data-use. As Corrigan, Grove, and Vincent (2011) point out, school leaders do not need to learn to be data-driven, rather, they need "to reassess what data are important to [their] goals and organize them with a process or framework that makes more sense" (p. 41).

School leaders are fully aware that a wide range of data are available and know they are responsible for making "data-driven decisions", however few are able to pinpoint what that fully entails in the complex practice of educational leadership. This speaks to the literature warning that future school leaders are in short supply; this ambiguity in expectations for the complexity of leadership roles may be the reason few educators pursue administration. Creating a culture where school leaders feel comfortable and confident in their ability to use data may alleviate some of the pressure for accountability. Truly understanding the possibilities of data-driven decision-making should be liberating, not threatening.

Leadership preparation has improved as programs have strategically sought to meet the needs of schools. Despite these improvements, or perhaps because of them, leadership preparation has become as uncreative and standards based as many school curricula across the nation, where creativity, innovation, and deep learning are sacrificed for uniformity and delivery of a standard orientation to leadership. This is an even greater truth when applied to the unglamorous realm of data-driven decision-making. Leadership preparation programs along with school districts that support meaningful internship opportunities are poised to re-vision the ways in which aspiring leaders use data and encourage creativity and deep understanding through socialization and peer coaching for improved leadership. Leaving data use and understanding on the backburner of leadership preparation will only exacerbate the frustration and complexity of school leadership.

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