

Leading School Change Through an Ed.D. Program: Developing Effective Educational Leadership in Partnership With Local School Districts

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this paper is to describe how one university collaborated with local P-12 partners to create an Ed.D. program in Educational Leadership. This program's goal is to professionally develop aspiring district-level school leadership in concert with local P-12 partnership school districts. As a direct result of those partnerships, the program provides doctoral candidates with opportunities to implement transformative leadership initiatives, meaning those that substantially challenge the status quo, in local participating P-12 school districts as a critical component of their dissertation research. Examples of previous transformative initiatives include; ungraded classrooms, collaborative teacher-led schools, self-directed teacher evaluation programs, experiential and inquiry-based instruction, and student-led curriculum development. This article describes how the program was developed and the essential features incorporated into its design, including the teaching fellows, the Transformative Leadership Project, the coursework and dissertation, and the change initiatives led by doctoral students. The initial cohort for this program began in the fall semester 2017 with 22 doctoral students.

NAPDS Essentials: (2) A school-university culture committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community; (5) Engagement in and public sharing of the results of deliberate investigations of practice by respective participants; (8) Work by college/university faculty and P-12 faculty in formal roles across institutional settings

Change is an integral part of life and essential for both personal and organizational growth and while it may be defined in numerous ways, for this paper change is meant as a transformation or transition from one thing to something different and hopefully improved. Change is even more critical for school systems whose output has a direct and significant impact on a community's future. In today's schools, the need for school change and innovation is occurring at an ever-increasing pace. Not only is technology creating dynamic classroom innovations at an unprecedented rate, but it is happening at a time when school communities are becoming more diverse across the entire United States in urban, suburban and rural regions. In the past, large cities were often the destination of new immigrants; today, however, many newly arrived Americans reside in rural and suburban areas creating schools with students with increasing supportive needs (Marrow, 2011).

When change is needed most, school leaders are struggling to stay ahead of the curve or even to keep pace with the diverse students' needs in their schools (Strauss, 2017). Schools, like other enduring institutions, can be resistant to change. As with all organizations that foster the development of human capital, the essential element for successful change lies within its people. To properly prepare P-12 students for their futures, administrators must understand how to enact transformational leadership that is

adaptive to the changing needs of a diverse and technology savvy student populace.

The purpose of this paper is to describe how one university collaborated with local P-12 school districts, inclusive of several university professional development school (PDS) partners, to create a doctoral program in Educational Leadership. This program's goal is to provide professional development to aspiring district-level school leadership in partnership with local P-12 school districts. As a direct result of those partnerships, the program provides doctoral candidates with opportunities to implement transformative leadership initiatives in local participating P-12 school districts as an essential component of their dissertation research. This article describes how the program was developed and the essential features incorporated into its design, including the teaching fellows, the Transformative Leadership Project (TLP), the coursework and dissertation, and the change initiatives led by doctoral students. The initial cohort for this program began in the fall semester 2017 with 22 doctoral students, mostly from central New Jersey.

Monmouth University Partnership

The impetus for the doctoral program began through the Monmouth University (MU) Partnership. The MU Partnership

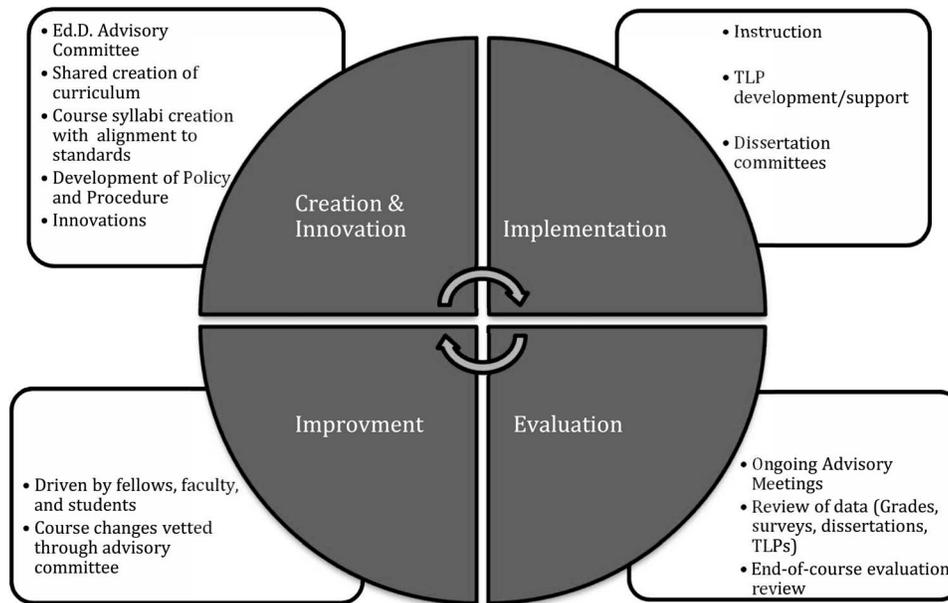


Figure 1. The University P-12 Partnership Ed.D. Program. This Figure Illustrates the Essential Components of the Program

is engaged in several initiatives, each of which is evaluated based on its capacity for increasing P-12 student learning. Putting P-12 student learning at the center of the partnership results in greater buy-in for the partnership, increased collaboration, and shared responsibility among partners for student learning, teacher preparation, and administrative training. New partnership initiatives that facilitate student learning are longer clinical experiences, the implementation of co-teaching, and the assessment of teacher candidate impact on student learning. These new initiatives build upon the foundations established by our PDS partners over a decade ago.

The partnership also offers professional development opportunities for school leaders, including the creation of several administrative academies (e.g., Principals' Academy, Superintendents' Academy, Business Administrators' Academy and the Special Services Academy). The academies provide administrative support and establish safe and supportive spaces for dialogue among practicing school administrators of MU school partnerships. Sikma, Garret-Dickers, and Lewis (2018) cite the importance of creating places where collaboration and dynamic growth can occur to enhance the instructional process among school partners. This is critical for school leaders as well. The School of Education at Monmouth University is also an active member of the monthly county's Superintendents' Roundtable for over ten years, and as a result, has developed long-standing relationships with the leadership of the P-12 school districts of the county. (For more information on Monmouth University partnerships, see Henning et al., 2018.)

These prior initiatives served as the groundwork for the creation of the Doctor of Educational Leadership Program. MU partners expressed a need for a program that led to better central office administrators with terminal degrees in educational

leadership. With this in mind, the School of Education worked to solicit input from district-level administrators across the county to plan and develop an executive, cohort model Ed.D. program in educational leadership for practicing educators. The university hosted several luncheon meetings where P-12 district-level administrators and university faculty were afforded opportunities to dialogue and create a plan for an Ed.D. program in educational leadership. Eighteen months later, after securing State of New Jersey and university level approval, Monmouth University offered its first courses in their Ed.D. program in educational leadership in fall 2017.

Teaching Fellows

The teaching fellows in the program are district-level P-12 administrators, primarily employed as superintendents, assistant superintendents, and principals who serve as program and course creators, instructors and evaluators. The designation of teaching fellows enables school leaders to play to an essential instructional role, one that has evolved naturally from the strong bond formed through the school partnerships. The teaching fellows provide real-world insights into carrying out the students' TLPs, keep the coursework grounded in the practical aspects of school administration, bring useful insights into the application of leadership theory, and make excellent role models for bridging the gap between theory and practice.

The teaching fellows all possess doctorate degrees in education and can provide sound advice and commentary on research design and the analysis needed to make inferences based on school data. The application and selection process for fellows focuses on leadership experience, academic prowess, and intellectual acumen. A vital role of the fellows includes serving on dissertation committees, which allows for a diverse blend of

university and school leaders advising the students on both their TLPs and dissertations. The majority of doctoral students report via end-of-course evaluations that the teaching fellows' real-world experiences and their applications of the presented theories are invaluable to their development as capable district-level future school administrators. Many teaching fellows also serve as members of the university's Ed.D. Program's Advisory Committee; sharing the responsibility for continual growth and evolution of the program and providing them a degree of ownership.

Transformative Leadership Project (TLP)

The purpose of the Monmouth University Ed.D. is to develop leaders skilled in both the practice and theory of leadership during the change process. To do so requires fostering the development of practitioners who are accomplished problem solvers across the continuum of doing and thinking, or put another way, across the continuum of practice and theory. It requires cultivating two distinctly different thinking types: the intuitive capability to make difficult, challenging, "on-the-spot" decisions and the analytical capacity to systematically analyze and evaluate data to improve programs (Helie and Sun, 2010; Kahneman, 2011). Fostering both of these divergent abilities cultivates expertise in the profession, stimulates creative problem solving, and fosters an experiential understanding of transformative learning (Beghetto and Kaufman, 2013).

To develop both the intuitive and analytical capabilities of educational leaders, the Ed.D. program in Educational Leadership requires two distinct, yet related, activities as core components. The first is carrying out a transformational leadership project in a school district, and the second is participation in design thinking which includes a thorough analysis of the project's impact providing a foundation for the dissertation. Each aspect is described below.

Transformative Leadership Project

A core tenet of the program requires all doctoral students to complete a transformative leadership project (TLP) within a local P-12 school district. To accomplish this objective, the program is designed around a real-world experience as a leader of a transformative project at the district level. Engaging in transformative leadership develops the on-the-ground decision-making experience and the intuitive capacity to lead transformative change initiatives. During this experience, the doctoral students in the program work as change agents in a new role, requiring engagement with other perspectives. They develop the communicative skills to motivate significant risk-taking, the judgment to make intuitive decisions, and the wisdom to know when to be collaborative and when to be directive.

The TLP forms the basis for students' research, which culminates with the writing of a doctoral dissertation. Students are required to identify a problem within the district through a needs assessment and then research options for mitigating those identified deficits. Once possible solutions are ascertained, the

doctoral students lead the change initiative within the selected P-12 school district. Upon completion, data are obtained to gauge the effectiveness of the change initiative, which forms the basis of the student's dissertation.

For local school districts, having doctoral students research current issues within their districts and then implement research-based solutions is a defined benefit of being a university partner. Another positive outcome of this initiative for local P-12 districts is the development of a cadre of competent district-level school administrators trained in research-based practices. The symbiotic nature of the relationship between the university and local school districts is a reason for both the doctoral program's effectiveness and its success.

Design Thinking

The TLP is selected, designed, implemented and analyzed for effectiveness by the doctoral candidate. It is expected that most doctoral candidates will choose and develop a project in his or her school district. The project is accomplished using an iterative, design-based approach that begins with a small pilot, then grows into a larger project across two years. During that time, doctoral candidates research, develop new ideas and redesign their projects based on both readings and ongoing data analysis.

Doctoral students use design thinking when piloting their TLP (Brown, 2009). Design thinking is characterized by three stages: Inspiration, Ideation, and Implementation. The Inspiration phase is characterized by a fresh idea, one that prompts a new design followed by an action such as a pilot project. During Ideation, which is the second phase, the pilot project evolves through a succession of pilot tests, providing an opportunity to adapt and refine the program design as problems are encountered. The use of a pilot enables problems to be solved while they are at a small scale and easily mitigated. The third stage is Implementation, which is characterized by the full implementation of the new innovation.

The new design typically becomes more complex as it evolves and new criteria are added in response to problems encountered. The original design is refined through cycles of enactment and reflection. Gradually the pilot grows, and the design becomes increasingly refined on a larger scale. Over time, patterns of behavior within the new system become more predictable and stable, thus leading to full implementation. Initiating and expanding pilot projects provides an excellent opportunity to learn how to manage a new system simultaneous to developing the design while minimizing the chances of failure (Brown, 2009). The TLP provides the platform for this process to evolve and serves as a foundation for the writing of the dissertation.

Coursework and Dissertation

The doctoral program was created to meet the needs of working educators with the entire 54-credit course offering occurring over 24 months. Classes are presented in a hybrid model with half of each class's sessions meeting virtually and the other half meeting

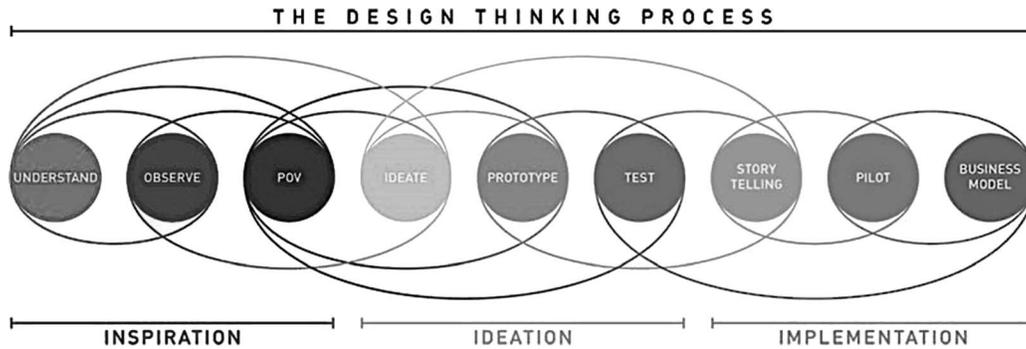


Figure 2. The Design Thinking Process from Inspiration to Implementation

in person, generally on weekends to lessen the impact on current practitioners' workday responsibilities. An additional year is also built into the program to afford ample time for students to complete their dissertations after completing the coursework if needed.

The program develops analytical thinking skills through the coursework and dissertation, especially the courses associated with research and data analysis. Fostering analytical thinking is the essential purpose of eight courses, although all the courses are intended to cultivate that ability. Through these courses, doctoral candidates learn the foundational theoretical frameworks that improve analytical thinking skills necessary to make rational decisions for large-scale change initiatives. Moreover, students enhance the reading skills required of high performing educational leaders while concurrently gaining the requisite writing skills for academic publication.

An essential aspect of the coursework is the purposeful sequencing of the curriculum to support the development of research initiatives, the creation of a procedural research design, implementation of an action research project and the writing of a peer-reviewed doctoral dissertation. At each stage, the course design and assignments support the development of a successful transformative leadership project and the writing of a dissertation. For example, during the first semester of the program, an applied program analysis course includes methods for evaluating programs, conducting a needs' assessment, and developing programming options to remediate deficits. Each of these skills are critical to the development of a student's research proposal and dissertation.

Change Initiatives

The transformative leadership projects are intended to have a significant positive impact on education in New Jersey while the doctoral students are still enrolled in the program. The program's goal is to have school leaders, who are also university students, serve as change agents to improve the P-12 school environments where they conduct their research. Students are encouraged to use current research on best practices to implement a programmatic of curricular change that mitigates an identified area of concern or weakness in their schools. So far implementing the TLP's has

proven to be one of the most significant benefits of the program, as illustrated in the examples of TLP projects below.

A number of the TLP's are focused on staff professional development in recognition that often change needs to begin with the adult standing in the front of the classroom. Teachers, who are the key to school success, remain the most essential variable in the classroom despite the infusion of new technology and the myriad other resources offered today's students. The TLP projects in this area included providing special education services to support teachers in a more inclusive classroom environment, enhancing science instruction in the elementary grades, providing personalized professional development for teachers, using video recording to promote self-reflection, and supporting the use of literacy strategies in teaching science.

Other TLP's address relational issues for both teachers and students. These include using morning meetings to foster more culturally responsive students, developing a social-emotional learning program for children in early grades, and implementing a restorative practices program at the high school level.

Three TLP's focused on at-risk students. One was a program to create a school advisory committee to provide more attention to a selected population of students. A second focused on a personalized plan for improving attendance for high absentee students. The third introduced a summer program for kindergarten students to prevent the loss of reading skills.

Two TLP's initiated programs to improve college preparatory classes. One implemented the Kahn Academy program in mathematics to provide more equity in test preparation. A second strove to increase rigor by offering courses in Advanced Placement classes at the ninth-grade level.

Two TLP's were designed to foster more autonomy in students. One was the introduction of student-led conferences, and the second was a program to develop student creativity and invention through an innovation fair.

Two TLP's promoted professional development of teachers through the mentoring of teacher candidates.

Many of the doctoral students' TLP's involve school change focused on staff professional development to mollify deficits, recognizing that the most important facet for increased student achievement is teacher quality and that is where the change initiative should be focused. The TLP projects in this area

ranged from providing special education services to classified students in a more inclusive classroom environment to enhancing science instruction in the elementary grades, all focusing the change on training teachers and staff members. Despite all the ancillary supports offered today's students, teachers remain the most important variable in the classroom and are the key to school success and improvement.

Change initiatives such as these can only be accomplished by dedicated leaders who create a critical mass of followers and then lead them to full implementation. This is indicative of what transpires with the doctoral students in completing their TLPs. The program's impact will continue to grow in the future as graduates utilize their learned skills in yet unimagined ways.

Conclusion

The creation of an advanced educational leadership program was accomplished by leveraging the university-P-12 partnership is the cornerstone of developing administrators trained in effective leadership methods grounded in research-based, real-world applications of theory and pedagogy. Secord (2014) asserts that effective school leaders require a series of skills not often taught in academia to be successful including the understanding of systematic change and the courage to try new things for the betterment of the children under their care. The Monmouth University Ed.D. Program in Educational Leadership is designed to engage aspiring administrators in real-world applications of leadership principles and initiatives where they become agents of change in local school districts creating superlative intervention programs for the children of our communities, challenging the status quo. Ringler (2007) identifies the importance of the application of action research to inform practice for school leaders in improving teaching and learning. This work cannot occur in isolation and requires collaboration between universities and school districts. Administrative programs that train the next generation of school leaders need to work in concert with those school districts that will ultimately employ them to run their schools. Further, ongoing partnerships for doctoral programs in educational leadership present a compelling vision for school administration preparation that will hopefully become the standard in the profession, where all administrative preparation programs employ the professional development schools (PDS) model for leadership training in the same manner as is done with teacher preparation programs. However, this will not happen without effort; successful PDS school partnerships require extensive planning and preparation, along with a shared vision between the university and school districts and this would be the same with administrative programs (Doolittle, Sudeck, & Rattigan, 2008). Using the PDS model as an exemplar provides a framework for successful administrative training programs of the future. ^{SUP}

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