Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT): A Structure for Examining Justice-Centered Leadership Outcomes

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Today's educational leadership candidates are subjects-in-process, as they learn and develop in response to rapidly changing social justice contexts with new potentials and new constraints. To prepare these candidates to lead social justice change, Educational Leadership Programs need to explore instructional approaches that grasp cultural challenges at the micro-level and interpret them against the larger historical social justice frame to perpetuate course effectiveness. In this conceptual article, the author proposes a process for analyzing course effectiveness through a cross-disciplinary framework, Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). Utilizing this activity-based framework to analyze current course structures will allow collective research projects to increase the effectiveness of creating action-driven justice centered leaders. The call is for all educational leadership programs to analyze their programs and social justice courses, and publish insights and their results to transform our educational system.

Keywords: Educational Leadership, social justice, cultural proficiency, transformation, Activity System, Activity Theory, Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, CHAT, justice-centered leaders

Today's public education leaders face numerous challenges, including inadequate funds, opportunity, access and achievement gaps, active shootings, pandemic-forced online learning, and social unrest. These significant challenges can become even more complicated when dealing with societal barriers for our low-income, special education, LGBTQ, and diverse students. Multifaceted educational issues such as these can overwhelm the most experienced leader, leaving new leadership candidates feeling underprepared for crisis decision-making.

The Commission for the Principalship (2020) states that influential social justice leaders and their preparation programs are misaligned. Despite reports of educational institutions' attempts to ensure critical social justice for their leadership candidates, there is little connection between preparing school leaders to identify, judiciously examine, reflect, and respond to possible social justice issues (Commission for the Principalship, 2020; Dracup, 2020). Currently, leadership programs have struggled to prepare future leaders for action to ensure equal access to resources, equity in learning, inclusion, active participation of diverse groups, and the promotion of human rights values (Rowan et al., 2020).

Tomorrow's educational leaders need to be well-versed in social justice principles, understand historical implications, be aware of their own biases, comprehend cultural change complexities, and take actions to secure our democracy (Brooks & Miles, 2010). A challenge emphasized in the literature is for educational leadership programs to explore how they might prepare educational leaders to change their institutions when, in reality, their actions, beliefs, and values are all conditioned by the educational organization they seek to transform (Manaseri & Manaseri, 2017; Sannino, 2011). The urgency is for educational researchers to collectively cultivate guidelines that assist in developing leaders who can turn theory into action and produce social justice outcomes. Given the more transparent social unrest of racial tensions and privilege, crucial disproportionality concerns, and the growing diversity of our student population, Educational Leadership Programs need to take a more in-depth look at how their courses are structuring their practicum to support transformative instruction that leads to social justice change. Through the lens of cultural proficiency, we need to study how our leadership programs are preparing future educational leaders to equip them to transform our education system for every student justly.

Typically, leadership programs offer courses on social justice frameworks or cover components of systemic oppression, critical consciousness, and racial inequities within program courses. Are these content areas enough to prep educational leaders for action? How might we successfully structure these courses to ensure leadership candidates explore their biases, learn about others' experiences, and problem-solve social justice issues with a diverse perspective resolution? This article will discuss program and course structures that impact leadership candidates' social justice viewpoints and ready them to be justice-centered leaders. It will also discuss the potential offered by cultural-historical activity theory for analyzing and redesigning new or expanded pedagogic practices, challenging the readers to examine their own courses, and promote institutionalized collective knowledge by publishing the findings.

Literature Review

As the number and intensity of social and political conflicts increase, scholars, policymakers, and practitioners seek ways to prepare leaders to be agents of social justice change in conflict-prone regions (Khalifa et al., 2016). The literature review started by analyzing published articles between 2005 and 2020 in the *Educational Leadership and Administration:*

Teaching and Program Development Journal that focused on preparing educational leaders' praxis. Scholars of the journal explored deficit-based thinking and designed leadership courses from a needs approach that affirms and nurtures the assets of all students and the infusion of critical discourse analysis of microaggressions (Arriaza, 2015). Additionally, these scholars expressed the importance of developing professional identity and identifying equity barriers (Arriaza, 2015; Lindsey et al., 2018). Most recently, the scholars emphasized the importance of developing facilitators for equity-focused leadership actions towards social justice change (Reis, Lu, & Miller, 2016). The articles accentuated the need to analyze educational leadership courses to maximize effective praxis for preparing educational leaders to identify, critically analyze, and transform educational barriers and the perpetuation of systemic oppression.

Identifying Beliefs, Values, Biases, and Assumptions

Collay (2006) highlighted the importance of *Transformational Learning* in providing educational leaders with opportunities to interpret their contextualized learning experiences related to historical assumptions. The emphasis was to increase knowledge and skills and explore multiple perspectives for developing inclusive leadership actions. The author noted the historical implications within educational organizations and explored how educational leaders of color and women leaders have formed beliefs based on past management styles dominated by privileged white males. Due to this influence, when educators began their careers in teaching, they brought some of the same beliefs from their experiences in childhood with them. These formed beliefs continued when entering the teaching profession and may limit cultural awareness and inclusion due to past experiences. Collay's article highlights the need for educational leadership programs to develop pedagogical constructs to challenge and overcome biased beliefs historically formed from prior experiences.

When restructuring a course to overcome the sociocultural phenomenon of historically dominate formed beliefs based on assumptions about other cultures, educational candidates must first recognize their biased beliefs and values. Lindsey et al. (2018) suggest that we anchor our instruction on exploring leadership candidates' assumptions, beliefs, and values about people of cultural differences from self. By assessing personal cultural knowledge, it begins the inside-out approach to identify biases that may perpetuate systemic oppression.

Based on developmental research to assess social-cognitive processes, the use of videos and personal stories will assist in connecting students to others' perspectives in a positive self-paced exploration (Sumbera, 2017). Using repetitive cycles will build upon the previous inquiry to help delve deeper and develop students' cultural knowledge to eliminate single-story assumptions (Adichie, 2009). The one perspective of a single-story creates stereotypes due to being incomplete, leading to misunderstandings.

Recognizing and Challenging Deficit Thinking

Sharma (2018) found, when considering *Deficit Thinking*, that we must acknowledge how deep-seated it is throughout the United States, where many educators in our nation's public schools identify as white. McKay and Devlin (2016) discussed Deficit Thinking in leadership and its manifestation when people of color are presumed not to have the necessary skills to be successful. The deficit thinking cycle affects people of color due to societal and leadership judgments starting in preschool throughout the professoriate. This reminds us that educational leadership programs

should have leadership candidates explore socio-historical processes that have kept conditions and opportunities between white students and students of color uneven, and not just on student outcome data. To activate the leadership candidates' cognitive interest, instructors can lead discussions and debates on historical obstacles and barriers of educational democracy in the United States. Exploring the universal agreements outlined in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution can lead to judicial, legislative, and executive insight to ensure individual rights for a sustainable structure for educational democracy. Current events analysis can also offer formative program checks on candidates' ability to apply their learnings and increase their self-confidence in handling current social justice issues.

Recognizing and challenging Deficit Thinking is essential in the preparation for the next generation of educational leaders. Through ethnographic exploration of various historically underserved populations, students can examine direct perspectives (McKay & Devlin, 2016). Reflecting on—and researching—student perspectives of educational experiences will allow leadership candidates to gain insights that challenge Deficit Thinking. Future leaders for equity, must also understand our schools and organizations as part of the systemic fabric of inequality (Dracup, 2020). Failing to acknowledge this reality, we will unwittingly reproduce oppressive dynamics that blame children for the deep-rooted opportunity gaps that hinder their growth. Examining educators, policymakers, policies, and educational structures through a social justice lens can additionally switch our thinking and overcome a deficit mindset (Sumbera, 2017).

Discourse Analysis and Critical Self-reflection

Arriaza (2015) discussed critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a strategy to build a perspective for developing school leaders' decision-making and school reform. CDA enables a vigorous assessment of the meaning of language when used to describe and explain. Personal discourse can perpetuate inequities, and self-awareness can aid in understanding how subordinating communication patterns can be disrupted. The intentional practice of CDA cultivates educational leaders' understanding of the micro-level ideologies that inform their leadership decisions. Moreover, the piece contends that *the language of school transformation needs to align with school transformation actions (*Arriaza, 2015, p. 1, emphasis my own). Educational leadership programs should emphasize language when cultivating relationships for transforming an organizations culture as an essential creative foundational structure.

Attention to language can assist in identifying social change needed for school reform. When discourse is applied to self-reflecting language in a professional setting, the alignment has the potential mean to transform inequities. Such alignment is said to be useful in understanding the micro level of relatedness in relationships for the benefit of reform of leadership (Manaseri & Manaseri, 2017). New language that speaks to under-performing students has potential to offer course offerings and programs to relate to specific structures and schedules so students can have a broader access to resources. When embedding CDA within educational leadership courses, practicing self-reflection on one's language in discussions can bring about awareness to transform inequities.

Identifying and Removing Obstacles and Barriers

Two decades of research in journal articles identified instructional challenges and the need for developing justice centered leaders for educational change. After analyzing California's school achievement indicators and measures from the past five years, it was evident by the consistency of performance patterns among ethnic groups that we need better culturally proficient leaders to drive the required educational change (Gay & Geneva, 2018; Landa, 2011). The change identified in the research consisted of breaking down instructional obstacles and barriers so every student can learn (Landa, 2011). However, this was greatly dependent on each leader and their ability to assess their own biases and personal knowledge on adapting to diversity (Lindsey et al., 2018). To confront and overcome educational impediments for student success, educational leaders must also critically analyze educational structures, policies, and protocols that prevent a culturally proficient instructional program (Sumbera, 2017).

Case studies and community engagement projects are an effective learning tool to assist leadership candidates in such exploration. They allow leaders the opportunity to analyze educational structures, policies, and protocols from multiple perspectives as well as explore their own biases and the origins of their assumptions through in-depth discussions. When candidates use case studies and reflect on their beliefs and values in a positive and safe setting, it opens up the opportunity for educational leaders to form new ways of thinking and communicating when leading our schools.

This literature review highlighted the need for educational leadership program accountability for producing social justice change agents. It suggests that these programs require adapting a cultural-historical lens when exploring instructional structures, procedures, and protocols operationalized as part of the systemic fabric of inequality (Sumbera, 2017).

Approach for Researching Course Structures

Educational leadership programs must explore socio-historical processes related to equity and understand how to interpret educational leadership candidates' contextualized learning experiences to transform learning into action. This article introduces a socio-cultural cross-disciplinary framework, Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). CHAT is related to theoretical perspectives arising initially from Vygotsky's (1978, 1986) work and focuses on dialectical-theoretical thinking (Dogan, 2018), which introduced culture into explaining human functioning (Engeström, 2001).

CHAT's philosophical and epistemological roots consider psychological components (affective component) and the micro-and macro-level social processes (behavioral component) within the social dynamics of power, privilege, economic status, cultural tensions, and civil rights issues (Engeström, 1987). It is Design-based research grounded in an activity system that uses three different levels of analysis, personal, interpersonal, and institutional exploration (Rogoff, 1995). These three levels provide a robust meta-theoretical framework for redesigning educational leadership programs and courses (Igira & Gregory, 2009). Moreover, CHAT interlinks social and cultural norms to historical processes for human action's situatedness (Vygotsky, 1978), which is ideal for informing the development of possible educational leadership social justice course structures and activities to increase action-oriented social justice leaders. However, CHAT focuses on specific and localized cultural and social practices, not on the larger society.

Represented in Figure 1 are the dynamics of the subject (i.e., student, teacher, program, or

course), object (i.e., motive, goal, or product), and mediating artifact (i.e., conceptual tools, strategies, components, or pedagogical practices) in the first-generation triad. The triangle represents individual and group actions established in an activity system. An activity system as a collective formation of complex mediational structure as the primary unit of analysis. Vygotsky's (1978) study of child development introduced the *culture mediation of action* in the first generation of CHAT. He maintained that human beings as agents react to and act upon mediating objects (artifacts) of the environment leading to an outcome (Vygotsky, 1978). No longer was stimulus a direct link to response as expressed initially by Pavlov in 1927. It was transcended by complex mediating artifacts to understand human behavior and learning (Engeström, 2001). This article focuses on course redesign to produce candidates who can identify and lead social justice change, but CHAT also provides a robust framework for analyzing programs.

Figure 1
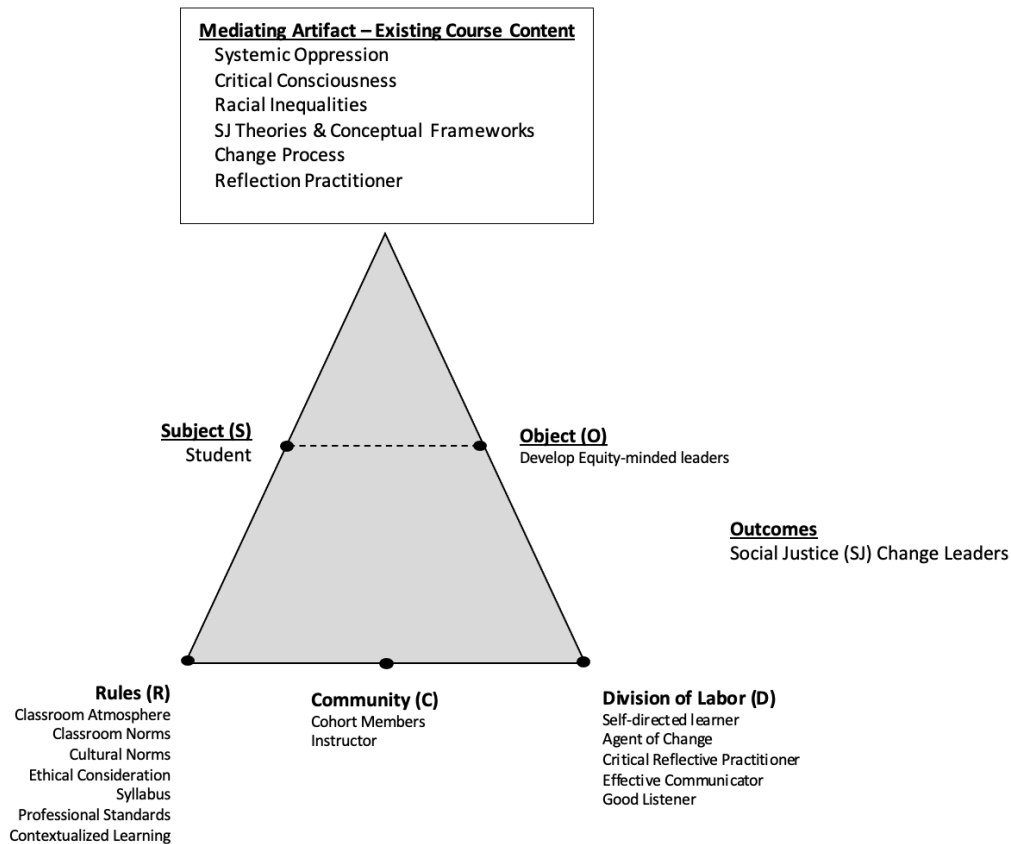*CHAT Model – First Generation – Personal Level – Equity-Minded Leaders*
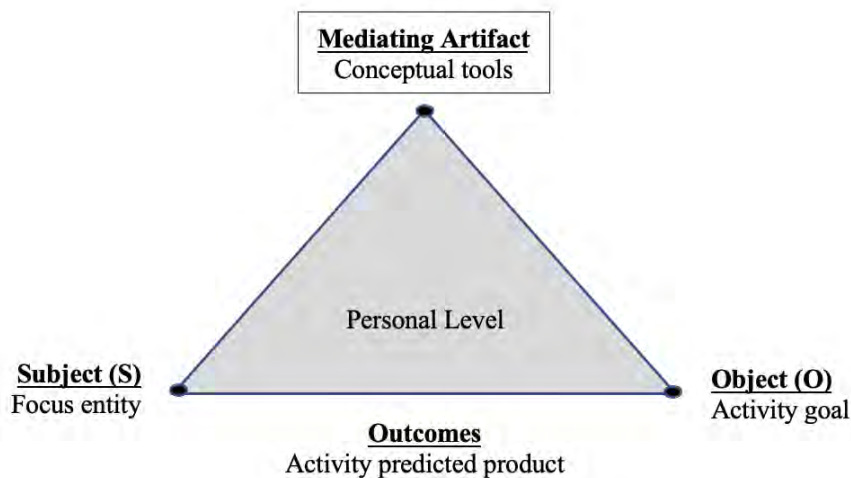
Notes: Adapted from Vygotsky's First Generation CHAT Model (1978).

Engeström (1987) developed the second generation of CHAT (CHAT[2]), which presents the complex interpersonal interactions of an activity system adding Rules (that regulate action), Community (stakeholders that share the general object of activity), and Division of Labor (between members of the community) components to the lower portion of the triangle (Figure 2). The addition of these elements reflects the social/collective elements in an activity system and the significance of analyzing the interactions between them. The added elements complement the multidimensional aspects of real-life situations on the activity system and are applied to groups of people rather than to individuals. Since human activity can modify the environment, we are also subject to the results of such modification. Thus, we change culture and society through mediation, and in turn these mediations change us (Engeström, 2001).

Since the upper triangle of Figure 1 (First Generation) represents individual and group actions established in an activity system, combined with the lower portion of the triangle, these CHAT[2] components provide educational researchers with a methodological framework for analyzing social justice activities (*activity in practice)*. By using CHAT[2], Educational Leadership Programs will be able to improve their understanding of various pedagogical practices (mediating

artifacts) and motives (Objects) needed to produce action-driven justice centered leaders. When applied in research analyses on courses, it allows for an in-depth understanding of the process (engaging in the activity) through a multidimensional lens and the effects of mediating artifacts on the object towards the outcome (Ellis et al., 2010).

Figure 2
CHAT Model - Second Generation – Interpersonal Level

Mediating Artifact – Existing Course Content
Systemic Oppression
Critical Consciousness
Racial Inequalities
SJ Theories & Conceptual Frameworks
Change Process
Reflection Practitioner

Subject (S)
Student

Object (O)
Develop Equity-minded leaders

Outcomes
Social Justice (SJ) Change Leaders

Rules (R)
Classroom Atmosphere
Classroom Norms
Cultural Norms
Ethical Consideration
Syllabus
Professional Standards
Contextualized Learning

Community (C)
Cohort Members
Instructor

Division of Labor (D)
Self-directed learner
Agent of Change
Critical Reflective Practitioner
Effective Communicator
Good Listener

Note: Adapted from Engeström (1987) Second Generation CHAT Model.

Engeström's (2001) third generation of CHAT (CHAT^3) uses two interdependent activity systems as the minimal unit of analysis (Figure 3). By interlinking the two activity systems together, it can highlight the tension of not having a unified motive (object) between the two subjects. This lack of alignment will lead to tensions and contradictions in the inter-activity system's outcomes. In exposing the contradictions that may occur within an inter-activity system, CHAT^3 aims to enable researchers to comprehend cultural and social influences effecting learning outcomes and to identify the catalyst for learning and improvement.

The catalyst for learning and improvement is in the Zone of Proximal Development indicating that object-orientated actions are "characterized by ambiguity, interpretation, sense making, and potential for change" (Engeström 2001, p.134). CHAT3's analytical approach is distinct from other qualitative methodologies and aimed at bringing about changes to practice. The process of CHAT^3 analysis can clarify an issue for the researcher, and this may in turn lead to the adoption of an action research approach to bring about change, but this is not the automatic outcome of applying the CHAT^3 methodology. CHAT^3 has been applied to various aspects of

education and uses a variety of ways to collect data including but not limited to observation, interviews, and document analysis (Daniels et al., 2010).
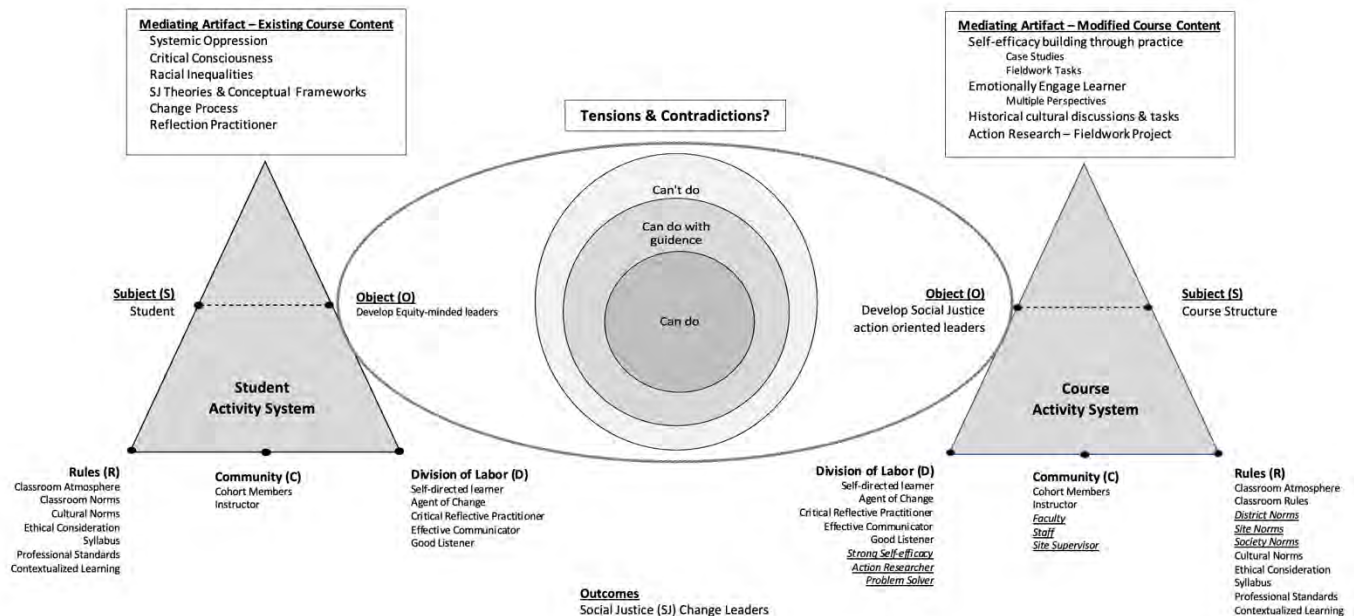
Chat3 Model Research Sample

To demonstrate the Chat3 model, the author will walk the reader through the activity system analysis steps but will not report on the actual data as this is not the article's focus. Due to several feedback surveys saying that candidates lacked confidence or ability to implement change towards social justice practices. The instructor performed an analysis on the educational administration social justice course in the program. The instructor analyzed student feedback data, grades, and evaluations. The analysis showed general students' excellent course grades, and expression that they highly enjoyed the course, thought the course discussions assisted with their learning, and learned a lot from the course. However, the candidates' action and confidence towards social justice change were self-reported and confirmed by supervising administrators as lacking. After further data collection through interviews, it seemed that candidates could identify and cognitively acknowledge social justice issues and change steps but were not confident in their ability to initiate a social justice change. Given that the program had about 75% first-generation minority candidates, the instructor felt they had not understood the importance of self-efficacy building in their courses. These findings led to further analysis by faculty and participating site administrators in looking at candidate work samples and interview transcripts. Figure 3 represents the findings in a unit of analysis CHAT^3 model of a student and course activity system interlinked.

There were several tensions highlighted in the division of labor element. Specifically, candidates' low self-efficacy in leading change, trusting in their problem-solving skills, and action research facilitation skills. The structure of the course was redesigned to include self-efficacy skill building and problem-solving practice with case studies and fieldwork tasks. An action research project was also added for site-based practice. Additionally, historical cultural discussions on actual events with tasks to support the action research components were added. Next, to get the candidate to emotionally connect to other perspectives to spark an urgency for change, an emotional component was introduced before every case study and for all social justice topics.

Once these course structures were identified the research group then noticed that the burden of producing social justice action leaders was solely on the course instructor. Accordingly, the proposed change would be to include the three division of labor components to all courses and add faculty, staff, and site supervisors to the community element. Lastly, district, site, and society norms were added to the rules element to give candidates practice of identifying and understanding the importance during change initiatives.

Figure 3

CHAT Model - Third Generation – Institutional Level (Two interdependent activity systems)

Mediating Artifact – Existing Course Content
Systemic Oppression
Critical Consciousness
Racial Inequalities
SJ Theories & Conceptual Frameworks
Change Process
Reflection Practitioner

Mediating Artifact – Modified Course Content
Self-efficacy building through practice
Case Studies
Fieldwork Tasks
Emotionally Engage Learner
Multiple Perspectives
Historical cultural discussions & tasks
Action Research – Fieldwork Project

Tensions & Contradictions?

Can't do
Can do with guidance
Can do

Subject (S)
Student

Object (O)
Develop Equity-minded leaders

Object (O)
Develop Social Justice action oriented leaders

Subject (S)
Course Structure

Student Activity System

Course Activity System

Rules (R)
Classroom Atmosphere
Classroom Norms
Cultural Norms
Ethical Consideration
Syllabus
Professional Standards
Contextualized Learning

Community (C)
Cohort Members
Instructor

Division of Labor (D)
Self-directed learner
Agent of Change
Critical Reflective Practitioner
Effective Communicator
Good Listener

Division of Labor (D)
Self-directed learner
Agent of Change
Critical Reflective Practitioner
Effective Communicator
Good Listener
Strong Self-efficacy
Action Researcher
Problem Solver

Community (C)
Cohort Members
Instructor
Faculty
Staff
Site Supervisor

Rules (R)
Classroom Atmosphere
Classroom Rules
District Norms
Site Norms
Society Norms
Cultural Norms
Ethical Consideration
Syllabus
Professional Standards
Contextualized Learning

Outcomes
Social Justice (SJ) Change Leaders

Notes: Adapted from Engeström's Third Generation CHAT Model (2001).

CHAT3 analysis introduced the mediating conceptual tools to understand how dialogue, multiple perspectives, practice, and networks of interacting activity systems could improve the outcomes of courses to produce justice-centered leaders. Although our sociocultural context shapes us, we are not necessarily determined by it. We must become more intentionally aware of how knowledge is socially constructed. If so, we can analyze the interactions and relationships within a specific activity system to create more action-driven justice-centered leaders.

The author hopes this article has enabled the reader to reflect on the structures that support the development of justice-centered leaders and stimulated interest in publishing from specific research insights.

Summary

Systemic oppression has historical antecedents. Systemic oppression exists at all levels and across structures that are interconnected and reinforced over time. Without rigorous examination of our programs and current course structures, our own behavior reproduces inequities. By default, current practices, cultural norms, and institutional practicums foster and maintain inequitable outcomes. Therefore, we must confront our past and current racism and inequality to transform our educational leadership candidates to act for transformation of our programs and courses. CHAT is the analytical tool that offers opportunities for analysis of educational leadership courses to stimulate discussion on course design through a critical conscious lens and embolden social justice leadership action. CHAT is also used to assists educators to consider the tensions, contradictions and different beliefs and values which may be creating assumptions leading to barriers while addressing educational social justice issues (Lindsey, 2018).

CHAT is undoubtably valuable within education as it is both a method of analysis and a

stimulus for change. It allows for faculty and their program partners to see social and cultural situations in a new light. It can foster different perspectives of members within an activity system to emerge more explicitly, and tensions and contradictions to become more evident. The analysis offers opportunities for collective reflection and critical planning of current course structures and pedagogical practices, leading to recommendations for improvements or changes. The benefit of CHAT analysis, is that it enables the researcher to study the process, engaging with an activity rather than merely the outcome (Ellis et al., 2010). The call to action is to examine the tensions inherent in candidates' changed role as a leader and use these to improve the outcome of producing action-driven justice centered leaders.

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