Funds of Knowledge and Educational Leadership: Recognizing and Leveraging Untapped Leadership Talent

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This article discusses the issue of inequities in educational leadership, of which we attribute largely to social capital and how educators interpret this capital. This concept is presented along with a range of leadership styles commonly accepted in education. An argument is made for using Funds of Knowledge as a lens for understanding leadership as well as in practice for addressing the social capital dilemma. We argue that leadership styles are not enough to correct inequities, but can be applied along with this Funds of Knowledge lens to identify and utilize untapped leadership in a range of educational settings.

Keywords: Leadership, Social Capital, Funds of Knowledge, influence, oppression.

Recent global uncertainties have shed light on several issues in the field of education. In addition to the constant reminder of political impacts on the future of our profession, the global health crisis resurfaced by Covid-19, and punctuated massive inequalities, continue to be glaringly present. Closures of low-income school sites put teachers in a new position to transform their instruction using ineffective and insufficient tools, and have forced school leaders to be the bearer of a constant stream of bad news to thousands of students and families in their communities. This environment of distance learning has presented another problem, perhaps one hidden to the public as a whole, and has been even more detrimental to the field of education. School leaders have been faced with the challenge of guiding and overseeing employees who are working from home. Some leaders have become stricter with rules and focus on accountability, while others have been trying their best to recreate the same procedures they had on site; still, a few others have challenged themselves to see this as an opportunity for reimagining leadership. In times of strife, it can be helpful to break from the cycles of tradition and reproduction by seeking a new approach. This paper offers such an approach to school leadership.

In this article, we will review perceptions of good leaders in school settings, challenge some of these perceptions using an understanding of social capital, and explore possibilities for addressing inequities through a Funds of Knowledge approach that may create opportunities for untapped leadership talent.

Perceptions of Leadership

While there are many definitions of leadership, Northouse (2016) offers one of the most elemental and, arguably, one of the most helpful. He writes, "Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (p.6). There are many attributes one can exhibit in a professional setting that may influence others towards a common goal, and interpreting effective influence is a complex process. Throughout educational research communities, there are many perspectives on how leadership can be conceptualized and defined by a set of standards (Young, Anderson & Nash, 2017) or competencies (Karadag, 2017).

The broader traditional study of leadership often examines roles in management, largely due to the conceptualization of leadership as a quality which is located in the leader—trait leadership is one example of this (Bryman, 1992). The Harvard Business School argues that there are six characteristics of effective leaders: influencing others, transparency, innovation, integrity, decisiveness, and optimism (Landry, 2018). The Blake-Mouton managerial grid is another popular model that polarizes four categories of leadership style on an X and Y axis of concern for people and concern for results, arguing that a balance of both are necessary for good leadership and a positive work environment that produces team efforts (Mind Tools).

Transformative Educational Leadership

Some researchers would argue that leadership in an educational setting must be analyzed with a different set of tools and measures, specific for educational outcomes. Lynch (2016) argues that there are five leadership styles that can have transformative effects in education settings: constructivist leadership, transformational leadership, distributed leadership, invitational leadership, and strategic leadership. Others argue that leadership style is not enough, but purpose should hold precedence. Ishimaru and Galloway (2014) argue for leadership centered on equity practices that promote activism. This perspective is taking hold in many circles that advocate social

justice changes in the field of education.

Distributed or shared leadership envisions leadership as a quality or process found in a group rather than as a quality or responsibility residing in a position or person (Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2008; Jones, Hadgraft, Harvey, Lefoe, & Ryland, 2014; Bolden, Jones, Davis, & Gentle, 2015; Woods, Bennett, Harvey, & Wise, 2004). Shared leadership repositions leadership as an emergent quality of a group rather than as a single formal role given to someone. This reconceptualization makes leadership involvement accessible to those without formal leadership roles, and is an environment in which the skills all individuals bring are much more likely to be valued and allowed to be leveraged toward the good of the organization.

The Missing Element in Educational Leadership Conversations

We presented this broad range of categories concerning leadership styles to emphasize the wide range of definitions and understandings related to leadership. Each may be valuable in its own way. Instead of advocating for one perspective on leadership over another, we seek to add an element to the broader conversation about leadership. Rather than focusing merely on leader output and capacity, it is important to first analyze the presence of social capital in the workforce and how it impacts perceptions of leadership.

It is no secret that even in the field of education, there seems to be a certain set of personal traits that remain prevalent in those who hold leadership positions. Fast tracking, nepotism, and rejection of equitable hiring practices are real issues in many educational settings and provide fodder for water cooler conversations throughout the education sector. The intersectionality of various forces of oppression in the workplace result in fewer opportunities for marginalized groups, even in an era where women dominate the field of education and minorities are the fastest growing groups of both students and teachers (Macias & Stephens, 2017). Educational institutions that seek to avoid these overtly negative practices may fall prey to a less visible set of oppressive outcomes. Educators, particularly those who may become educational leaders, must learn to become what Freire (2014) called dialogical; in other words, we must embrace open dialogue about oppressive actions and circumstances. In order to do so, we must understand social capital and how it impacts the professional experiences of educators.

Educators who pursue leadership positions must be prepared to model all aspects of equitable praxis. Freire's (2014) work reminds educators that work is more than just action, but a combination of action and reflection. Part of this reflection involves naming the world around us including oppressive systems, a practice which has been muted and glossed over for too long in the field of education. "Dialogue is thus an existential necessity" (Freire, 2014, p. 88). Yet, "dialogue cannot exist without humility" (Freire, 2014, p. 90). Educators must embrace open dialogue about oppressive actions and circumstances. In order to do so, we must understand social capital and how it impacts the professional experiences of educators.

Social Capital

Social capital is "the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that an individual or group accrues by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 119). This definition imagines social capital within a network of relationships, and social capital is the sum total of nodes on that network—the number of, and quality of, social connections. It is important to note

that social capital functions like legal tender in a particular country: we do not say that money is good or bad; it just is. It holds value within that system of exchange, but it also holds less value (and sometimes none) in another system, just like Japanese Yen hold value in Japan, but if a person was to travel to Turkey, they would need Lira, not Yen, as the medium of exchange. Different social contexts, therefore, hold different value systems, and a person's social capital in one context does not necessarily translate equally to other contexts. A congressional aid may have significant social capital in her own sociopolitical sphere, but less social capital in urban Los Angeles. This lack of Angelean social capital would make her social mobility in Los Angeles much more difficult than a person who has an extensive Angelean social network, and therefore more Angelean social capital.

Social capital manifests in a variety of ways in the workplace. Some individuals may have stronger personal connections with management due to sociocultural commonalities. Some individuals may have language patterns that reflect that of the dominant syntax within that social context. Some individuals may have access to resources outside of the workplace that further their status in the field. These forms of social capital may lead to upward mobility or allow for perceptions of leadership qualities in those who possess such capital regardless of their direct impact on abilities to produce particular outcomes as a leader. We can learn much about how society uses language, sex, origin, and other characteristics to reproduce social class systems from Bourdieu and Passeron's (1990) groundbreaking work on *reproduction*. This work is often utilized as a lens to criticize how the education system subjugates students. However, we rarely consider how this process of reproduction that educators promote, knowingly or unknowingly, may also therein subjugate themselves from upward mobility at the same time. In other words, by establishing a hierarchy of appearance, communication, demeanor, or any other such qualities, educators may be supporting the act of using larger societal expectations on them where evaluations for leadership potential are concerned.

Social Capital in Education

Some theorize that when a profession is more associated with femininity, as education is, there are social ramifications of losing prestige (Cacouault-Bitaud, 2001). Drudy (2008) argues that this reflects several social issues revolving around sexism and perceptions of masculinity, resulting in negative working conditions for all genders. This issue creates a situation in which educators are starting from a disadvantage when it comes to upward mobility in their career, since they have already chosen a profession that has less prestige than other fields, therefore leading us to unconsciously respond to other forms of social capital as indicators of leadership qualities.

Even in a profession steeped in discussions of diversity, equity, and social justice, we may still struggle with our own perception of leadership potential by deferring to what Bourdieu (2013) calls symbolic capital, which can be a misrecognition of nobility, goodwill, repute, notoriety, prestige, honor, renown, talent, intelligence, culture, distinction, and taste (p.299). In other words, when certain members of the population hold power, we may be more likely to associate their characteristics with power. The dynamic leader's personality qualities, good or bad, become desired qualities, and these qualities become a sort of litmus test thereafter for good leadership among their followers. Therefore, the educator who may have traits that reflect those of others in power may be, in turn, perceived as powerful and perhaps as having leadership potential beyond their peers. Those who hold power often ascribe their power to (and believe it to be the result of) their own effort, and are more likely to perceive others as having leadership qualities if they are

similar to themselves. This principle of human power dynamics has significant implications for the development of educational leaders; indeed, if current leaders are more likely to perceive people with similar social capital to themselves as potential leaders, then those with dissimilar social capital to current leaders may go overlooked. An educator's social capital is likely affirmed or diminished throughout their evaluations: while they may appear to have improved in many school settings, their scores are often nothing more than a subjective examination scored on arbitrary skill sets. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) criticize the use of examinations in school systems calling them the "unexplained legacy of national tradition or the inexplicable action of the congenital conservatism of academics" (p.141). Likewise, teachers often have the same criticisms of standardized tests for students in our current school systems. Yet, the teacher evaluation and tools used for promotion often also lack authenticity. Rather than being driven by the one being evaluated, these evaluations are imposed by systems of power; thus reproducing or diminishing social capital that matches that system of power.

This phenomena impacts not only women, people of color, and women of color disproportionately, but may even impact white men who do not have as much social capital as their peers. The ethics of this equity issue are paralleled by practical ramifications: if this phenomenon occurs in educational leadership development and selection, then it is likely that large pools of leadership talent remain unrecognized and underutilized, resulting in a commensurate lack of organizational optimization.

Funds of Knowledge as a Response to Reproduction

If the social theory of reproduction may explain the ongoing inequalities we see in leadership opportunities and styles among educators, it may be possible to resolve some of this reproduction with a theory for sociocultural learning. Funds of Knowledge (FoK) is defined as "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household and individual functioning and well-being" (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005, p.133). In other words, FoK are skill sets developed according to one's unique life experience, set of values, and personal perspectives. This perspective also implies the assumption that all experiences are valuable in some way, which aligns with a progressive philosophy that most educators claim to embrace. The use of a FoK approach to learning in any setting assumes an honest assessment of social capital in order to challenge inequities. In fact, many researchers believe that using FoK combats the longstanding problem of deficit thinking (Hogg, 2011; Macias & Lalas, 2014).

Benefits of Using Funds of Knowledge

Many researchers advocate for the use of a FoK approach for instruction with K-12 students, preparation of K-12 teachers, and instruction of adults in higher education settings because the method almost always results in authentic learner engagement. In the K-12 setting, using FoK has provided a method for promoting culturally relevant instructional methods that reach minority student populations and increase academic engagement (Macias & Lalas, 2014). FoK has also proven to be useful in working with adults. Larotta and Serrano (2012) found that investigating parents' funds of knowledge improved the experiences of students during reading instruction and helped ESL parents get more involved. Use of FoK has also been found to enrich the pedagogy and practice of preservice teachers and limit deficit thinking as they explored expertise in their school communities (Licona, 2013; McLaughlin & Barton, 2013). Teaching in

this manner encourages the learner to utilize their own personal skills and experiences that may not otherwise apply in a traditional learning environment. Given that most leadership approaches in education seek to encourage engagement, equity, and teamwork, it would seem beneficial to approach leadership with a FoK lens.

Funds of Knowledge in Leadership

Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti's (2005) study on FoK involved training a group of teachers to analyze their students with an anthropologically informed lens that takes into account experiences, skills, and sets of knowledge that pertain to personal lives. Teachers then utilized the funds of knowledge that their students possessed and intentionally implemented them into their lessons. The result of this original study and hundreds of reproduced variations resulted in higher levels of engagement with learning content.

How Can Leaders Do This in an Educational Setting?

By breaking Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti's process into simpler general steps, we find a process that can be easily applied to educational leadership.

Step 1: Visit, observe, and learn from the population in question. Just as these teachers visited, observed, and joined the communities of their students, so must educational leaders visit, observe, and learn from the everyday work that educators do. The key to this step is following the anthropological approach that respects the population as opposed to observing with authority. This means that leaders must leave their offices and administrative wings and engage their employees in the spaces in which they do their work, not with the intent to evaluate or direct, but rather to learn; the leader becomes an ethnographer, studying and learning from organization members in their workplace.

Step 2: Analyze results and do more research. Just as the teachers in this original FoK study did, the leader must reflect on field notes, identify themes, and conduct further research on findings. This means that leaders would have to draw upon their training as researchers or, in some instances, be retrained if necessary. This may include learning ethnographic tools or approaches and thoughtfully negotiating the tension between embedded ethnographic research (Lewis & Russel, 2011) and more traditional distancing from research subjects. Regardless of what leaders learn throughout Step 1, the results can be valuable for furthering goals, objectives, and outcomes in this educational setting. The purpose of Step 2 is to allow for reflection on the skills and strengths the employees in question possess that are underutilized. Imagine all the unsung accomplishments and special skill sets that go unnoticed each day in a school setting that can be discovered and then leveraged through fully detailed observational inquiry!

Step 3: Brainstorm and apply uses for FoK of employees. In the same manner that the teachers in the original FoK study went on to find ways to implement their students' FoK into their lessons, so must educational leaders next find ways to apply their employees' FoK in the workplace. Inevitably, this implies a willingness to explore at least some shared leadership and teamwork. Delegation of responsibilities, highlighting of accomplishments, recognition of efforts, and collaboration for change would follow as leaders find ways to use these FoK. We believe that these outcomes all lend themselves to what research identifies as good leadership qualities and would actively shift any deficit thinking by creating new social capital for teachers, staff, counselors, and other employees.

Challenges to the Approach

Implementation of our proposed approach raises some potential challenges within the current structures of today's educational institutions. One such challenge is that the power differential between administrators and subordinates will affect the interactions between administrators and teachers or staff. Obviously, a formal ethnographic study of one's own subordinates is fraught with ethical challenges, but most administrators need not engage in formal or comprehensive ethnography; rather, an informal and relational approach is suggested. While power differentials remain and must be considered with such an approach, we recommend that administrators seek to understand an employee's FoK and approach employee interactions as a learner. While formal evaluations must include performance reviews, if an administrator seeks to learn about subordinate FoK outside of the evaluation process, this could contribute to a positive shift in organizational culture. Another challenge to such an approach are the limitations and strictures imposed by a collective bargaining environment. Although unions are not found in all educational institutions, they are found in many. Faculty and staff unions negotiate contracts and working conditions, and evaluation processes are negotiated by unions. Linking a FoK approach to the contractually identified processes may be problematic as these would first need to be negotiated; however, if administrators used an ethnographic lens of their own and simply engaged with subordinates as a learner, these problems could be considerably mitigated. Even a servant leadership approach (Greenleaf, 2002) employs an informal learning approach that need not be linked to formal evaluative processes; consequently, there are several different approaches to this kind of learning that are available to administrators.

Untapped Leadership Talent

The constructs of both social capital and funds of knowledge are complementary. Indeed, the conceptualization of funds of knowledge would not have been possible without the social capital construct. Each construct uses the metaphors of currency to explain social power; in this way these two constructs are easily blended. Social capital is a much broader construct, however, and is applicable in a wide variety of contexts, providing a useful lens for the analysis of social, political, cultural, and relational dynamics. Funds of knowledge has roots in environments of power inequality as a means to shift the locus of value toward those with less power, thus utilizing knowledge and skill that was previously undervalued. This is a tool to strategically diversify the knowledge available to the larger community and to be a vehicle for equitable inclusion. We argue that the use of these two constructs together can allow a more equitable framework for selecting new educational leaders, making more knowledge and skill accessible to the institutional leadership as a whole, and improving leadership quality.

Using FoK as a lens to analyze how to approach leadership in practice may promote several positive outcomes. First, untapped leadership talents will likely be discovered that can benefit the school community and ultimately change how we all view social capital and, in turn, leadership potential. Second, this approach may encourage those in leadership to explore more equitable practices that promote shared responsibilities and constructive collaboration. Third, these leadership talents, having found new purpose, can be honed, and over time result in a more diverse population of leadership. In this instance diverse has multiple meanings: demographically diverse as well as a diversity of skills and personalities.

In order for this approach to be maintained, a consistent commitment to mentoring must be

present among leadership. New education professionals, both faculty and staff, need careful mentoring from both colleagues and administrators as they grow in their career (Lambeth, 2012). Wang and Odell (2002) argue that this mentoring should be humanistic and personal, use an apprentice model, and promote a critical constructivist perspective. Likewise, those who fulfill management positions also require mentoring that is personal and promotes the growth of their unique capital as well as support for navigating barriers they may face (Mendez-Morse, Murakami, Byrne-Jimenez, Hernandez, 2015).

Overall, we believe that in order to address the diverse challenges that educators will undoubtedly continue to face, those in leadership must consider tapping into the Funds of Knowledge of the staff and faculty and welcome diverse perspectives. New problems require new ideas and new leadership styles. This untapped currency can bring value to the workplace and provide a better return as we invest in the social capital of our colleagues who may have not been considered for leadership before.

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