

## Education Leadership Programs Responding to Current American Crises

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### ABSTRACT

The 2020 global pandemic has further exacerbated the inequities suffered by our most vulnerable students. Here in the United States, the intersection of two pandemics have raised major issues surrounding racial discrimination, civil rights, and equal justice. This essay details one university responding to the current American crises in three areas that are pertinent to leadership preparation programs: recruitment, curriculum, and the problem in practice dissertation. By sharing our experiences and the literature that guides our actions, this paper aims to inspire education leadership programs to revitalize their efforts to support education leaders committed to social justice.

### KEYWORDS

*social justice, COVID-19, school leadership, DiP, CPED*

Educational inequality has been of topical interest to social justice scholars for decades (Dantley & Tillman, 2010; Farrow & Coaxum, 2021; Furman, 2012). Definitions of social justice have varied; however, we define social justice leadership as advocating for students who have been historically and currently marginalized due to race/ethnicity, class, gender, disability, religion, or sexual orientation (Furman, 2012). Much of the research in this area has been focused on the plight of minoritized students, the achievement of learners from impoverished backgrounds, and the growing concern for students experiencing trauma (Mckenzie et al., 2008). While these topical areas have garnered significant attention in educational research, the academic outcomes of students clustered in these categories are questionable at best. This acknowledges that our advancement in research has not been met with advancements in policy and practice. In other words, those at the margins of education remain disconnected from theoretical advances.

The global pandemic outbreak has further exacerbated the inequalities we have witnessed in education. Here in the United States, the intersection of two pandemics have raised major issues surrounding racial discrimination, civil rights, and equal justice. The initial Covid-19 outbreak occurred as the nation felt outraged by the death of an unarmed black man at the hands of police officers. These events unmasked the deep-rooted issues of poverty and racial relations that continue to impact the schooling of America's

children. These two pandemics have spurred new interests in understanding how race impacts the outcomes of students. For several decades, the achievement gap has plagued scholars who attempted to understand the disparities in achievement between racial ethnic students. Minoritized students have consistently lagged behind their white peers in academic performance (Dantley & Tillman, 2010). Scholars have utilized critical theories to understand threats to educational equity caused by race, gender, class, disabilities, sexual orientation, and other social descriptors that impact student performance, engagement, and achievement.

This raises a concern for instructors and leadership preparation programs that prepare current and aspiring school leaders. More than ever before educational leadership preparation programs must prepare school leaders to lead an educational process that is socially just for all students (Mckenzie et al., 2008). Covid-19 and racial unrest within the United States has presented new challenges for school leaders that require a transformative leadership paradigm. For instance, the sudden change to virtual learning occurred to protect the safety of America's children and teachers and have required school districts and leaders to rewrite policies. Many of these leaders have had to draw on a transformative leadership approach to address needs of equity that they found in the new reality of virtual learning. This changing dynamic further beckons preparation programs to equip leaders with the tools necessary to



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transform communities by improving the educational outcomes of all students, even those in crisis. In doing so, the student's capacity to engage in transformative leadership may actualize goals of liberation, emancipation, democracy, equity, and excellence when put into practice (Shields, 2011).

This essay details one university responding to the current American crises in three areas that are pertinent to leadership preparation programs: recruitment, curriculum, and the problem in practice dissertation. By sharing our experience and the literature that guides our actions, this paper aims to inspire Education Leadership Programs to revitalize their efforts to put into practice the social values that education leadership programs have long claimed to support.

## POSITIONALITY

Education leadership preparation programs should respond to calls to improve the way future leaders are prepared to address crises in order to maintain their commitments to forming equity-minded and culturally competent leaders. Therefore, we approach this topic as faculty within an EdD leadership preparation program located in the Mid-Atlantic United States. The doctoral program in Educational Leadership welcomed its first cohort of students in 1997 as the program was designed to develop leaders prepared to make meaningful change within education settings. The program has four pillars which incorporate leadership, social justice, change, and research; components that we find necessary for the preparation of equity-minded leaders. The mission of the program was also designed with a P-16 focus to produce cross-talk over multiple sectors of education. In that sense P-12 doctoral students become familiar with the higher education sector for which they prepare students and higher education students become more familiar with the P-12 sector from which they receive students. Students are more sector and content focused as they take track-specific courses that center attention on their particular education sector.

Within recent years, our EdD program joined the Carnegie Project on Doctoral Education (CPED) with the idea that the program needed a stronger emphasis on helping students to address problems in practice (PIP). The program was initially designed with a PIP model but over the years drifted to resemble more traditional research doctoral programs. CPED has allowed our program to reclaim its mission as a program anchored in improving practice and appropriately responding to inequities within school systems. Furthermore, this partnership has allowed the program to consider its admissions process, the content of the curriculum, and the dissertation in practice (DIP) as significant factors in the preparation of school leaders. In particular, a social justice and transformative leadership approach within each of these areas could be the key to ameliorating oppression in the context of schooling.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

We conceptualize our essay by utilizing Furman's (2012) framework for social justice as praxis that is intended to inform the design of leadership preparation programs focused on social justice activism. Furman's framework is anchored in Freire's (2002) notion that social justice leadership must encompass both reflection and action. Therefore, Furman postulates that leadership preparation programs must develop social justice activism in school leaders

across five dimensions: personal, intrapersonal, communal, systematic, and ecological. As multiple pandemics have reframed social inequities in yet another context, leadership preparation programs for social justice are provided with an opportunity to examine how their program outcomes provides school leaders with knowledge, skills, and dispositions across the dimensions. The personal dimension involves deep and critical reflection of values, assumptions, and biases in regards to race, class, and in essence marginalization of any kind and how it impacts leadership. The interpersonal dimension focuses on the role of relationships necessary for social justice work with staff, parents, parents, and this occurs across cultural groups. The communal dimension focuses on the work of building community across cultural groups through democratic principles. The systematic dimension then is focused on the work of transforming school districts and schools into socially just learning spaces for all students. This includes a close examination of school policies and practices that have historically contributed to the underachievement of minoritized populations. Finally, the ecological dimension takes the work beyond the level of the school in recognizing that educational inequalities seen within schools is a reflection of larger society (Furman, 2012). While the model is not meant to be exhaustive, Furman's framework can assist programs in shaping content that equips school leaders with the competencies necessary to tackle educational inequality that continues to widen the achievement gap of minoritized students (2012).

Additionally in this paper, we juxtapose Furman's framework with McKenzie et al.'s (2008) framework which purports that leadership preparation programs for social justice focus on three key aspects: student selection, knowledge and content, and induction after graduation. Particularly, McKenzie et al.'s model asserts that leadership preparation programs select students who already have an awareness of social justice issues. The model also asserts that the content within leadership preparation programs should raise the critical consciousness of instructional school leaders as they create inclusive schooling practices for all students. We utilize the initial two pillars of McKenzie et al.'s framework.

Taken collectively, these two models offer the best solutions for leadership preparations focused on social justice that reframe their praxis to ensure school leaders are able to handle the challenges presented by Covid-19 and racial unrest.

## EdD Recruitment Teams: Part of a Socially Just Response to Current American Crises

When responding to the Covid-19 outbreak and the concurring racial justice protests, we highlighted the role of recruitment as an integrated part of our EdD Program goals concerning social justice. Recruitment is of critical importance to successfully developing equity-minded graduates (McKenzie et al., 2008). Unfortunately, the pressure to achieve revenue goals can undermine wider program goals and cause substantial barriers to preparing social justice leaders (McKenzie et al., 2008). Our recruitment team, working collaboratively with our larger department, abruptly revamped our strategy in several ways as the severity of the current American crises became apparent. The recruitment team responded to the crises by emphasizing our Educational Leadership program as preparation towards social justice leadership. Although our EdD program had already been redesigned to emphasize promoting equity for historically marginalized student groups, recruiters began to boldly describe social justice as the primary characteristic of the

program. We found that underscoring this feature was attractive to candidates and motivated them to overcome issues, challenges, and the doubts they grappled with during the application process. Despite scholars and activists calling for education leaders to address systemic inequities, George (2017) wrote that EdD programs focused on social justice are surprisingly still a “novelty” (p. 9). Our deliberate marketing connected with the aspirations of social justice driven candidates and allowed us to reframe the classic practice of *selling your brand* (Ortagus & Tanner, 2018) in a meaningful way that accurately reflected our program as being redesigned to focus on forming social justice leaders. Further, we have reason to be optimistic about reducing attrition rates. Our experiences have found a social justice orientation to be a powerful motivator for EdD students when overcoming obstacles and completing academic goals. Because we are attracting students committed to social justice, we anticipate that their motivations rooted in social activism will be a valuable resource used towards program completion.

Another initiative of our recruitment response plan was to increase our efforts towards forging community partnerships with institutions serving marginalized students. Our Doctorate in Educational Leadership program has long worked to build a network of social activism that effectively addresses inequities in localized settings. However, the recent American crises made clear that a renewed energy had to be applied to ramp up our outreach efforts. Program leadership identified recruitment teams as an effective means of forming new relationships and a strategic plan was implemented that entailed reaching out to education leaders serving students of color. We found that our outreach efforts were reciprocated and new partnerships blossomed allowing for us to expand our cyber recruitment initiatives as we explored long-term mutual goals for new professional relationships.

Our efforts to form partnerships with educational communities serving students of color attempted to achieve two main goals that align with our commitment to social justice principles. First, we sought to recruit teachers and administrators serving marginalized students in an effort to support them through equity issues facing their communities. Education Leadership programs aim to develop scholarly practitioners while students maintain their professional roles within their organizations (George, 2017). EdD students hold dual positions: learners within a research community and active education practitioners. An institutional opportunity arises by providing a dynamic university space that supports students grappling with challenges of inequalities facing their communities. Vibrant EdD programs are capable of empowering students to reflect, identify, and act as change agents within their own education communities (Furman, 2012). By supporting education practitioners *in the field* serving marginalized students, our institutional influence on equity issues expands.

Next, our new partnerships assisted our endeavors to increase the number of education leaders of color. Scholars have raised awareness about the lack of education leaders of color and have highlighted the positive impact they have on marginalized students (Ingersoll, May, & Collins, 2019). Districts who serve children of color employ higher numbers of education professionals of color (Ingersoll, May, & Collins, 2019) and prioritizing forming relationships with these institutions was a means to attract doctorate students of color. When making contact with prospective students of color, our recruitment team was conscious of providing personalized attention throughout the process. Establishing a welcoming and professional relationship where potential students were comfortable enough to utilize

recruiters for information and/or to express their challenges and concerns, proved to be a meaningful assistance for traditionally marginalized students forging pathways towards doctorate program matriculation.

One illustration of our university's outreach strategy that laid the groundwork for our present recruitment restructuring plan was the forming of a cohort within an urban P-12 school district. In 2016, recruitment efforts initiated a partnership with a large public-school district serving low-income minoritized students. After a series of collaborative meetings with district leadership and marketing, the recruitment team was granted access to the faculty and a student cohort was formed. Student support was enhanced by applying a cohort model that entailed students remaining in an identifiable group for the entirety of the program (Fifolt & Breaux, 2018). The model helps our aims to provide students with an affinity group to work collaboratively with as they reflect upon real world issues facing their education communities (Aikan & Gerstl-Pepin, 2013). Being supported by their cohort, the students were empowered to put theory into action within their own communities throughout their doctorate learning experience. Ultimately, establishing these practices within a cohort model promoted scholarly leaders beyond graduation, who are now well positioned to influence policy that responds to inequities. This established model, formed by a previous partnership, informs our current response to the recent American crises as we work towards similar cohorts with major districts serving marginalized communities.

We note that our recruitment response that was initiated in March of 2020 has exceeded expectations. The strategic response plan resulted in a forty-nine percent increase in EdD enrollment despite the pandemic's devastating impact on higher education (The Economist, 2020). Our experience suggests that Education practitioners may be strongly attracted to social justice-oriented leadership programs.

## A CURRICULUM RESPONSE

Upon hearing the compelling stories of education leadership students grappling with tumultuous times, our faculty began the process of revising the curriculum to be more relevant when addressing problems of practice related to social justice issues and dilemmas. The aim was to assist students in resolving problems of practice when dealing with an unforeseen crisis such as Covid-19. When experiencing crisis situations, our students and school leaders were sharing stories that emphasized three principles: trust, community building, and crisis leadership.

### Trust

Leadership theories display themselves differently in specific contexts, trust usually is a part of any specific leadership theory, either explicitly or implicitly. Without trust among the adults in a school and the community, there is almost no chance students will excel (Sutherland, 2017). Building relationships with school boards, community members, and parents makes it possible for district leaders to advance their core mission. In schools, trust is recognized as a critical component related to both student achievement and the behaviors of individuals and groups that contribute to effective schools. Without trust, people do not take chances that characterize genuine learning and change. In spite of that, in times of crisis, such as Covid-19, trust is a resource that can lead schools to continue to



learn and to flourish (Sutherland, 2017; Furman, 2012). Social justice leaders proactively build trusting relationships with colleagues, parents, community stakeholders and students in their schools, across cultural groups. Trust reflects the central role of relationships in social justice work (Furman, 2012; Dantley & Tillman, 2010). Given the diverse and cultural climate that exists today, leaders need to expect that there may be cultural differences in perceived trust and actual trust.

## Community Building

School leaders have recognized the essential role for parents, community organizations, community health groups and post-secondary institutions in the functioning of strong schools, especially during a crisis situation. Hurricane Katrina highlighted many of the inequity horrors that are again brought to the forefront by the Covid-19 crisis including lack of food, homelessness, and unstable homes where students are subject to abuse, neglect, and other forms of trauma (Belkhir, 2015). These challenges, that far exceed the ability of any one leader to solve, require help from both inside and outside the school (Beabout, 2014; Fullan, 2007). The role of the educational leader under such grueling circumstance must be to emphasize support, collaboration, communication, and relationships with the various school communities.

Social justice leaders work to build community across cultural groups through inclusive, democratic practices (Farrow & Coaxum, 2021). Preparation programs should encourage students to practice the type of data gathering they will need to use throughout their careers in order to gain deeper knowledge of the community in which they work and the cultural groups they serve. Life histories and cross-cultural interviews are useful tools to master. In addition, courses should include the meaning of democracy and democratic community in contemporary education, and the principles of inclusive practice. Social justice leadership involves proactive efforts to establish democratic forums and processes for dialogue and decision making that are inclusive and include traditionally marginalized groups.

## Crisis Leadership

Effective educational leadership has proven to be imperative during Covid-19. Districts and schools serve as frontline organizations for students, families, and communities to provide services and the negative effects of these services being jeopardized has rippled through the nation. Effective educational leaders may utilize a variety of leadership styles and change principles during a time of crisis (Beabout, 2014). School leaders may not be able to control or influence the occurrence of crises, but their responses can lead to positive learning and change in schools and communities. It is important to recognize that the school and community response to the Covid-19 crisis is complex rather than simplistic. However, researchers suggest that crisis leadership requires more than is required of leadership in noncrisis situations and that being a good leader differs from being a good crisis leader (Muffet-Willett & Kruse, 2009). It is likely that crises will repeatedly occur in our current times rendering the study of organizational crisis crucial for today's leaders (James & Wooten, 2011). This importance cannot be overstated because of the increased complexity and uncertainty within today's institutions (Demiroz & Kapucu, 2012). The fact that these crises are unpredictable, intense, and longer in duration, and cost a lot more make it a meaningful conversation and focus on the importance of

higher education leadership preparation programs (Prewitt & Weil, 2014).

The students in our educational leadership program are under extreme stress. The Fall 2020 cohort is our first group to respond to the new reality of Covid-19 and is made up of state, district, PK-12 and higher education leaders and teachers. They clearly express that they need to be better prepared for a crisis and/or dilemma in the future. Educational change scholar Michael Fullan (2007) has written that "when things are unsettled, we can find new ways to move ahead and to create breakthroughs not possible in stagnant societies" (p. 1). In response, the faculty has started to look for new ways to address crises that affect our schools and communities by assessing the entire program and developing courses and/or supplementary workshops that address social justice and leadership while simultaneously introducing our students to the literature on trust, community building and frameworks that address the prevention, action and recovery phases of a crisis.

## THE PROBLEM IN PRACTICE DISSERTATION

Historically, the hallmark of the doctoral experience in most programs in the United States is the dissertation. The dissertation serves as the culminating activity for doctoral programs and at one time was seen as the threshold that allowed doctoral candidates to move from student to scholar. However, the educational doctoral dissertation since its inception has received much scrutiny as to its purpose, relevance, and place in the modern doctoral experience (Guthrie, 2009). As a result, we have witnessed the distinction between the research doctorate and the professional doctorate, the expansion of the professional doctorate, and a growing typology of dissertation types. The end result has caused many disciplines to rethink the role of the dissertation in the doctoral experience (Storey et al., 2015). In the field of school leadership preparation, the Dissertation in Practice (DIP) is growing rapidly as the field continues to rebound from the fierce criticisms by Arthur Levine (2005) who slammed leadership preparation programs for lack of rigor. Perhaps his criticism at best was a beckoning call for social justice scholars within those programs to consider how the dissertation could be used to impact issues of equity and justice within schools. The Carnegie Project on Doctoral Education defines the Dissertation in Practice as a scholarly exercise intended to address a complex problem in practice (Storey et al., 2015).

The DIP brings together all five dimensions of Furman's (2012) framework for school leaders. Within the personal dimension, doctoral students engage critical reflection and select a problem in their practice as the basis for starting their dissertation work. In many instances, these problems of practice are grounded in social and academic inequities that present themselves in the daily realities of schooling. The second dimension focused on the interpersonal allows doctoral students to continue reflection by confronting their own mental models as they critically examine how these social and academic inequities exist among their own student and faculty and staff population. This is where transformative leadership is critical as school leaders develop action plans to address the problem identified in the dissertation. The third dimension focuses on communal that moves a doctoral student from reflection to the implementation of the action plan (Freire, 2002), as doctoral students utilize inclusive practices and involve others in the dissertation experience. Such inclusive practices include but are not limited to action research, professional learning communities, and group

dissertations. The systematic dimension allows for impact as the work of the DIP can be utilized to dismantle policies and practices that hold local schools and school districts hostage to educational inequality. Finally, the ecological dimension allows doctoral candidates to understand the broader outcomes of their work as they develop recommendations and implications for future policy and practice.

Our EdD Program in Educational Leadership utilizes a dissertation as the culminating experience of the program. In the initial design of the program and for the first decade, the program dissertation represented the culminating project of the doctorate program degree. As a matter of fact, for the first decade of the program, all students were required to complete their dissertation using an action research model aimed at improving some aspect of its practice. Since one of the four pillars of the program is social justice, it would follow that many of the dissertations were designed to address equity issues through a transformational or transformative leadership framework (Shields, 2012). After the critiques of Levine (2005), the program drifted to more of a Ph.D. model where students moved away from action research to a more traditional dissertation model. The role of CPEDs has been instrumental in recent years for paving a path for the program to return to the DIP model. As such, the program currently allows students to choose from several dissertation models so that the work has a significant impact on practice. While there are several aspects of the dissertation process that are unique, we highlight the importance of dissertation coursework, dissertation program supports and the student-advisee relationship.

### Dissertation Coursework

One of the fundamental strategies to ensure student success with the dissertation is the transition out of coursework to courses, workshops, or institutes that introduce students to the purpose of the dissertation as well as demystifies the process that forces many students to an all but dissertation (ABD) status. Students enroll in two courses that prepare them for dissertation work. In Dissertation Seminar I, students spend time conceptualizing the scope and breadth of the dissertation. During Dissertation Seminar II, students complete a twenty-five page prospectus that provides an overview of the dissertation for students to share with a potential chair and committee members. As the final activity from this sequence of courses, students prepare and present a poster session. This activity which is co-sponsored by the College of Education, brings together dissertation students and faculty within the college with the hope of students receiving feedback from several members and finding committee members. For most students, this is the first time they have presented their ideas outside of the classroom and they find the poster session to be a critical activity for the reasons discussed above.

### Dissertation Bootcamps

To ensure that the number of “all but dissertation” (ABD) students remain very low, the program offers dissertation bootcamps in January and June that utilizes a workshop format and allows students to engage in dissertation content and writing. The bootcamp serves several purposes. For those who are completing coursework, it provides further opportunities for students to consider their transition into the dissertation. Since a major portion of the bootcamp is dedicated to writing, students get the benefit of working

with up to multiple faculty members who rotate and discuss student's work with them. This also allows faculty to redirect students in their dissertation aspiration to tackle an issue from practice and in many cases, social justice issues. Secondly, the bootcamp is tailored to jump start those students who after coursework have difficulty connecting to the dissertation. We have found this to be another useful strategy in reducing the number of students who would be ABD. These strategies may be useful for leadership preparation programs seeking to provide supports during the dissertation process.

### Advisor-Student Relationship

Research has lauded the relationship between the dissertation advisor and doctoral student. Other than financial factors, the advisor-student relationship is a major factor in persistence. Leadership preparation programs should consider the process of how students select dissertation advisors. These relationships in many cases are formed based on topical interests. However, there are many other factors embedded in this process that should be recognized because of its importance to dissertation completion. Some of those factors include work style, feedback delivery, common interests beyond the dissertation, and role of the chair. Taken collectively, dissertation coursework, dissertation supports, and the advisor-student relationship make it possible for students to complete socially justice focused DIPs.

### CONCLUSION

Educational Leadership Preparation programs should foster the development of social justice praxis (Dantley & Tillman, 2010) among doctoral candidates who lead schools. Through the examination of their recruitment efforts, preparation programs can actively recruit and engage school leaders aspiring for more transformative approaches towards equitable excellence. The curriculum provides the space for preparation programs to provide a framework for candidates to develop strategies towards their social justice praxis. The problem in practice dissertation then offers an opportunity for school leaders to explore aspects of their praxis as they work to address issues of equity and social justice. The recently experienced crisis situations, while bringing urgent attention to issues of equity in schools, allow educational leadership preparation programs to respond in ways that foster healthy and inclusive schools.

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