Tethering One's Self to the Pole of Utility

A Deweyan Critique of Recent Shifts in Leadership Preparation

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Educators have long operated under the assumption that principals have a significant effect on schools as well as the teachers who work there. These claims have been supported through a number of recent studies (Bottoms & O'Neill, 2001; Hale & Moorman, 2003; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Mazzeo, 2003; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). According to these studies, principals have the potential to influence conditions within schools, and their influence can reach as far as actual student outcomes. Further, Orr and Orphanos (2007) determined that leadership preparation can significantly influence the way leaders lead. Therefore, universities' innovative leadership preparation programs can influence student outcomes as well.

For the sake of this paper, I do not challenge the findings of the studies mentioned above. Preparing leaders to support current reform rhetoric is not the solution to today's ills. In fact, the atheoretical leadership preparation that is prominent in many university-based programs is a critical and influential factor in the larger problem of a narrow and commodified purpose of schooling. Because principals have such an empirically proven effect on schools (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Ogawa & Hart, 1993; Stark-Price, Munoz, Winter, & Petresko, 2007), preparing them within the prescribed ways of being necessary for today's policies makes them keepers within a troubling ideological empire (Apple, 2004). Like keepers within ancient empires, school leaders have little or no power to create meaningful, democratic communities motivated by inquiry. Instead, many support the dictates of the pervasive corporate ideology found within NCLB rhetoric. Thus,

preparing leaders to support schools for specific student outcomes as articulated by NCLB is problematic because those outcomes can only be achieved in the absence of genuinely thoughtful actions. In other words, to successfully produce student outcomes as dictated by current legislation, many teachers must abandon critical thought and follow rigid prescriptions outlined in whatever reform models their school systems have adopted (Vernez, Karam, Mariano, & DeMartini, 2006). In this sense, a teacher's capacity to think is a liability. She must, instead, efficiently follow the prescribed instructions in order to ensure the fidelity of the model's implementation. By the same token, a principal's capacity to think—inasmuch as that thinking may challenge the scientifically-based status quo—is likewise a liability. Given the sense of urgency for raising test scores, the effective principal is one who can get all teachers on board and complying with the prescribed models adopted for her school. To do this, the principal must likewise be quick to comply with the mandates handed down by her district.

Leadership programs across the country are changing to reflect the rhetoric of current NCLB reform narratives. However, this shift is not only problematic for the preparation of future leaders. By virtue of the fact that these leaders will have such an influence on schools, the changes will also have a damaging effect on teachers and, ultimately, on the kinds of authentic outcomes we should seek for students. Therefore, stakeholders in leadership preparation are actually instrumental in perpetuating the problems of current prescribed reforms. Said differently, by eschewing theory within our leadership preparation programs and by tethering ourselves to the pole of use (when said use is exclusively raising test scores), we enslave ourselves—and the students we serve—to a narrow and misguided purpose for schools.

The Assault on Leadership Preparation

Over the years, critics have lamented the conditions of America's schools and how our nation's education has negatively affected our economic progress. These criticisms about schools and teachers ultimately led to criticisms about school leadership. In 2003, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and the Broad Foundation generated a report, "Better Leaders for America's Schools: A Manifesto." Authors in this report argued that schools of education, state departments of education, and local education agencies had long formed a "cartel" in leadership preparation that needed to be broken. They further argued that America's schools are facing a crisis in leadership, and while there was a surplus of individuals certified to be leaders, there were not enough qualified people to serve in administrative capacities. The authors of the report argued that simply changing certification requirements would not solve the problem. Instead, states needed to change traditional certification requirements so people with strong leadership qualities could become administrators even if they did not have school experience. Further, they argued that school

districts should play a major role in shaping the training of their leaders and they should also be free to seek training from other providers beyond traditional university programs.

In 2005, Arthur Levine levied additional criticisms against university programs that prepare school leaders. In his report, Levine argued for higher standards and more stringent accountability measures for universities as they prepare school leaders. He further argued that leadership programs should have more field experience and tighter coupling with school districts in terms of resources and planning. Levine argued that these changes should take place at the programmatic level, and his criticisms have been echoed by a number of policy makers and scholars in the field. Coupled with the rhetoric about student outcomes emerging from NCLB, many stakeholders involved in leadership preparation point to a sense of urgency in preparing leaders who can produce results quickly. As noted by the National Conference of State Legislatures:

> More than ever, states need to develop and implement comprehensive strategies to ensure that today's leaders have the skills, knowledge, and support required to guide the transformation of schools to meet higher standards and new requirements for progress. (Vitaska, 2008, p. 4)

Leadership's Response

A number of stakeholders in leadership preparation have responded to the criticisms levied by Levine and others (Young, Crow, Orr, Ogawa, & Creighton, 2005). However, these responses have been severely handicapped by the fact that we lack sufficient warrant achieved through empirical research into leadership preparation. The amount of scholarship in educational administration is troubling in and of itself. However, Murphy and Vriesenga (2006) paint an even bleaker picture for leadership preparation when they note that only 8% of the articles they reviewed in educational leadership addressed preservice training programs. Only 3% of the articles they reviewed from the four leading educational administration journals dealt with leadership preparation. Thus, from the already limited number of research studies in the field, a very small percentage deals with the preparation of leaders. Within the few studies found, these authors found little to no information regarding how leader candidates are recruited and selected, what they are taught, and how they are assessed. Murphy and Vriesenga (2006) further note that while more empirical research has been conducted in recent years and while mixed method approaches have provided more means through which preparation programs can be studied, limited samples, inadequate analytical frames, and attention to surface issues have all hindered any significant progress in inquiry into leadership preparation. The authors conclude that we need more research on how to prepare school leaders because what we have is not sufficient to drive reform efforts.

Further, the field has lacked a strong theoretical argument regarding the preparation of future leaders. While theory is often referenced in various forms of leadership preparation, there is very little evidence of strong theoretical trajectories within the professional conversations regarding the preparation of leaders— where theory is used in meaningful and ongoing ways to address real problems of practice. When theory is mentioned, it is more often than not in reference to tacit understandings inherent within natural leaders (Evans, 2001) or ways to make the business model more efficient within schools in order to help in "raising the bar and closing the gap . . ." (Fullan, 2003, p. 11). This "what works" mindset is not new. Griffiths and Iannaccone (1958) noted this same focus in 1958. According to this image of leadership theory, leadership preparation programs merely need to make the implicit assumptions of future leaders explicit and operational. Cuban (2003) laments that business-inspired images have shaped our narratives about school reform and thus leadership preparation. Unfortunately, as Barbara Ehrenreich (2005) so vividly portrays in her work as an unemployed corporate executive in *Bait and Switch: The Futile Pursuit of the American Dream*, much of the corporate narrative that educational leadership borrows is likewise not grounded in research or theory. Instead, most of its inventories, personality scales, and other clever constructs are largely borne of pop psychology where leaders in the corporate conversation "derive management principals from Buddhism or Genghis Kahn" (p. 18). In contrast, Foster (1989) argued years ago and English (2005) has argued since that leadership preparation should be seen as a critical, moral practice, and this requires seeing leadership in terms of exteriorities. In other words, leadership should not be seen in isolation of the larger sociopolitical context, but this is what happens when the narratives about preparing future school leaders focus on specific outcomes tied to market forces. English (2005) argues,

> When market language and logic come to define the terms, the possibilities, and the problems, it also privileges the chosen solutions because they are the only ones that 'fit' the definitions of the problems. (p. 96)

Foster's arguments over 20 years ago are even more salient today. The challenge for theory in leadership preparation stems largely from a need to control the learning environment. The narrative of school leadership—and thus leadership preparation—has been rooted in this kind of image for so long that scholars and practitioners alike have lost (or never developed) their ability to see their work in any way other than closely tethered to the implementation of prescribed practices. This need for control is not new. It reflects an historical battle educators have had with the need to control the outcomes of schooling. Dewey (1929) described the phenomenon almost a century ago:

> It is very easy for science to be regarded as a guarantee that goes with the sale of goods rather than as a light to the eyes and a lamp to the feet. It is

prized for its prestige value rather than as an organ of personal illumina-
tion and liberation. It is prized because it is thought to give unquestionable
authenticity and authority to a specific procedure to be carried out in the
school room. (p. 15)

Ironically, much of the criticism levied against leadership preparation programs
involves too much emphasis on theory. According to Levine's report, traditional
leadership preparation curricula focus too much upon theory and do not provide
actual support for the day-to-day needs of principals. Because we have neglected
to use meaningful theory to solve real problems in schools within our leader-
ship preparation programs, external critics like Levine have been able to paint
the programs with a broad and vicious critique. Thus, without a strong theoreti-
cal platform from which to address the criticisms of policy makers and pundits,
we have contributed significantly to our own demise. As McLuhan (1994) noted
about media, we create our spaces that then create us. When we create leadership
preparation spaces devoid of meaningful theory and critical inquiry, we cannot
prepare future leaders to be thoughtful and actively engaged in promoting demo-
cratic communities within the schools.

Programmatic Implications

As a result, many of us involved in redesigning leadership programs that comply
with new state regulations do not have sufficient grounds through which to argue
for programs that do more than merely focus on managerialism (Grace, 1995;
Leithwood, 2001). Instead, many of us have changed our programs to focus more
clearly on specific outcomes for student achievement. In most of these efforts,
leadership itself is now couched in terms of specific outcomes. For example,
professional organizations and accrediting agencies have developed various
iterations of national standards for educational leaders. Standards such as those
developed by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education
(NCATE) and the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) are used
as the basis for program revisions as well as for state-level certification tests.
Additional reforms have been initiated at the state level. For example, the Wal-
lace Foundation helped to support the State Action for Educational Leadership
Preparation (SAELP) grants to help states discern what leaders need to know and
be able to do. As a result, states have changed their certification requirements
and universities have changed their curriculum within leadership programs
accordingly (Young et al., 2005). Further, other organizations are doing parallel
work to develop leadership preparation materials to either support or replace the
efforts for universities. For example, the Southeastern Regional Education Board
(SREB; 2002) have also been involved in reforming leadership preparation by
developing curricular modules to facilitate the preparation of future school lead-
ers (Young et al., 2005).

Thus, forces currently driving reforms in leadership preparation are not predicated upon empirical evidence or theoretically grounded warrant. Instead, they emerge through business rhetoric and gain strength amidst a culture of blame. As a result, those of us responsible for leadership preparation often grasp at certain concepts that take on more importance than they should. Images such as "outcomes," "performance-based instruction," "partnerships," and "coaching" shape the nature of revised leadership programs without the benefit of an empirically justified or theoretically grounded context in which to examine these reforms. While the constructs have gained some degree of traction in other aspects of education, leadership professors have done little to nothing to make a theoretically or empirically justifiable link between these isolated constructs and leadership preparation. Instead, we operate under a blind faith that these constructs and how we specifically apply them to leadership preparation are appropriate and even necessary.

As noted above, those of us who are charged with redesigning leadership preparation programs have not established the theoretical or empirical authority we need to support meaningful reform in those programs. In any social and organizational context, this would pose significant challenges. However, we are also faced with pressure points created by the accountability culture of P–12 schools at the same time many universities are responding to increased pressures to seek higher levels of institutional prestige. The convergence of these organizational and social dynamics poses even greater threats to us as we attempt to simultaneously reform and protect the very existence of our leadership preparation programs.

Pressure Points in the Assault on School Leadership Preparation

One of the most significant pressure points that have affected leadership preparation involves the sea change brought about by an all-consuming accountability narrative driving work in schools under NCLB. Much of the policy and political narrative about schools today erases context and focuses exclusively on test scores. As a result, much of the narrative regarding leadership preparation focuses on student achievement, and images of student achievement are seen exclusively as test scores. This perpetuates two significant problems. First, it perpetuates a false assumption that there is a direct and immediate relationship between leadership behaviors and student test scores. If one merely applies A (when said A is some specific leadership behavior) then outcome B (a rise in test scores) will occur. This simplistic notion of "best practices" undermines the nature of schools as complex adaptive systems and leadership itself as messy and exciting work (Boisot & Child, 1999; Breault & Allen, 2008). Second, it denies what English (2005, 2006, 2008) has characterized as the "exteriorities" of schooling. It is no longer acceptable to look at social or political contexts when

wrestling with issues of student achievement. Many have argued that when we look at contextual issues we are ignoring our responsibilities and trying to blame others for our failures. Instead, we should see our work in a "no excuses" frame and simply apply best practices in an efficient manner to get the desired results. This "no excuses" approach to policy and subsequently to leadership preparation has a tremendously damaging effect to the work of social justice that should be the focus of our leadership preparation programs.

A second pressure point for leadership preparation programs is centered in the organizational identity of their universities. When leadership preparation programs are forced to make drastic shifts in their programs to comply with new certification policies, they often forfeit the larger aims previously articulated in their work. Holding onto core values in the midst of such radical and prescribed changes is difficult, if not impossible. It does help if the university itself supports a strong sense of purpose, because the leadership preparation program can then plan their revisions according to the larger sense of institutional purpose (and can justify the language and nature of their aims according to their need to be consistent with the university). However, many of the universities housing leadership preparation programs would fall into the classification of "prestige-seeking universities" as identified by Brewer, Gates, and Goldman (2002). According to these economists who reviewed hundreds of universities across the United States, prestige-seeking universities have no clearly articulated and enacted mission other than advancing themselves on the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings. Thus when leadership preparation programs in prestige-seeking universities are forced to make radical program changes in response to new certification requirements, they do not have any sort of ideological basis from which they can gain traction in arguing for more than mere compliance and efficiency.

A third pressure point for leadership preparation is found within the convergence of the P–12 and post-secondary environments. As Levine argued, many states are requiring stronger partnerships between universities and school districts for leadership preparation. For example, in Georgia, universities must have formal partnerships with districts, and districts are responsible for identifying acceptable candidates for leadership preparation. In and of itself, this is not a problem. However, research shows that partnerships between universities and schools or school districts are rarely if ever mutual. While past arguments and anecdotes implied that universities force their agendas on schools, research bears out the contrary (Breault, 2010). When universities and schools or school districts enter into partnerships, it is far more likely that the schools will hold the power to dictate the nature of those partnerships. This phenomenon extends far beyond who makes partnering decisions to include the very image that schools bring legitimacy and relevance to university programs—that once students are in the schools, then they actually begin to learn something.

A fourth point is largely pedagogical, but it has implications regarding the previous three concerns. Along with the increased partnerships between schools

and universities, many new certification requirements focus on increased time in schools through extended internships or other performance-based requirements. For example, the new certification requirements in Georgia require 60% of the work in preparation programs to be situated in the schools in some form of internship. This requirement in and of itself is not a problem, however, it becomes a problem when those developing programs do not specifically ensure that such experiences are, in fact, educative. Particularly since "performance-based assessment" is viewed without any real theoretical or empirical grounding and the image that school experience is inherently better for preparing future leaders than university experience, programs are far more likely to create minimally educative or even mis-educative experiences through their internships. Schools will identify what needs to be done, and universities will make those things part of their course requirements. Without meaningful conversations between all stakeholders and without a larger image of the nature and purpose of schooling, universities are far more likely to promote efficiency over educative potential.

The final pressure point that influences how leadership preparation programs are being redesigned involves the culture of the professoriate and the reward systems of universities. While scrambling to make significant programmatic changes and secure partnerships, professors are also required to maintain lines of research and scholarship for the sake of tenure and promotion. Faculty members within prestige-seeking universities are often required to not only increase their level of scholarship production, but they must also produce that scholarship in more and more prestigious publication outlets. As a result, many professors pursue more esoteric scholarly trajectories that do not specifically address current problems in schools. Given the way universities outline their requirements for tenure and promotion, university professors are not inherently required to be stewards of their fields or of practice. When they choose to pursue scholarly trajectories that are more likely to find outlets in highly esteemed academic journals instead of more accessible practitioner-based journals, professors may very well struggle with balancing their research, teaching, and service. As a result, they may very well sacrifice one or more for the other. Ineffective scholarship may ultimately result in failure to achieve tenure and promotion and lead to greater faculty attrition and less stability within a leadership program. Ineffective teaching or service resulting from a focus on research and scholarship may compromise partnerships and put leadership programs at greater risk. Particularly in tight economic times when university presidents are looking for programs to cut, leadership faculty must strive to maintain good relationships with their external stakeholders in order to secure their programmatic footprint within the university. This footprint can be further compromised if leadership professors pursue more esoteric lines of inquiry and run the risk of reinforcing the image of out-of-touch academics that so many policy makers and public school leaders lament. Thus, as long as universities continue to couch tenure and promotion in such norm-less requirements—merely focusing on number of publications and status

of sources of publications—this organizational trajectory may continue to under-mine the role universities have in making a difference in schools through prepa-ration programs and, as a result, may put those very preparation programs at risk.

Conclusion

At the risk of appearing as a "Chicken Little" for the field, I believe we have reached a "perfect storm" in terms of leadership certification and the role of uni-versities in the preparation of school leaders. The criticisms (like Levine's) are not necessarily new. A number of professional entities—such as Broad, SREB, and other corporate sponsored groups like GLISI in Georgia—have been work-ing to reduce or remove universities from the business of leadership prepara-tion for some time. Now, however, we are seeing significant changes in policy and in certification requirements that put our programs at greater risk, and we have done little or nothing to prepare an empirically or theoretically justifiable response. Instead, we continue to react to the forces we encounter. We have not successfully demonstrated the necessity of theory and how it serves to solve edu-cational problems—whether in our own scholarship or in the implementation of programs, and so theory itself is now seen as the problem and we are seen as the source of theory. Until we become fully committed to stewardship of our field through empirically and theoretical grounded work, we will continue to lose ground in the work of leadership preparation. Unless we are able to provide a significant image of the roles we play in preparing leaders—both in our own personal scholarship and in the design and implementation of our programs, we will become extinct. Universities that have to cut out programs in order to fund their more prestigious initiatives will see educational leadership programs as expendable. We caught a glimpse of this in Georgia when university presidents were asked to make drastic cuts across their institutions and one prominent state university proposed to shut down their entire educational leadership department.

So what can we do? First, educational leaders need to speak out against the current obsession with certainty. Current calls for scientifically based decisions in education are undermined when policy makers naively associate science with certainty. As Dewey (1933) notes, "it is very easy for science to be regarded as a guarantee that goes with the sale of goods rather than as a light to the eyes and a lamp to the feet" (p. 15). Further, the focus on standardized assessments and quantifying all means of performance in schools perpetuates this faith in cer-tainty. What those who seek certainty ignore is that no finding from research can ever be translated into an immediate rule or policy. Schools are complex orga-nizations, and leaders should focus on increasing understanding of their com-plex contexts rather than attempting to control them through prescribed means. Greater attention to qualitative inquiry in leadership preparation as well as in visions for school improvement plans can help shift the focus away from the cur-rent quest for certainty.

Second, leaders in education need to clearly articulate the systematic nature of reflection and its effects on practice. When Dewey (1956) addressed curriculum issues for children he noted the following:

> Nothing can be developed from nothing. Nothing but the crude can be developed out of the crude—and this is what surely happens when we throw the child back upon his achieved self as a finality, and invite him to spin new truths of nature or of conduct out of that. (p. 196)

The same argument can be made regarding the preparation of school leaders. Putting them into schools to perform without any means of systematically examining those experiences does not lead to intellectual or professional growth (Daudelin, 1996; Foster, 1989; Schön, 1983; Short, 1997). At best it reinforces the need to comply with authority and to do so in an efficient manner. As Restine (1997) notes in her framework for learning and development in leadership preparation, the multiple forms of knowledge that constitute the conceptual, technical, and human skills required within professional preparation need to be engaged through reflection. This is not always easy. Restine further notes that reflective activities are challenging because they force individuals to question their beliefs, values, and assumptions. If this is done without proper guidance, then future leaders may struggle with systematically building or rebuilding belief systems or images of possibilities for schooling. In addition to mentoring or some other form of guidance in the process, this level of deep reflection takes time. When leadership programs are forced to reduce the amount of face-to-face time their students have with university professors, then the programs are at greater risk to reduce or eliminate this level of deep and systematic reflection.

Finally, stakeholders in leadership preparation programs need to fight to preserve the foundational elements of their programs (Foster, 1989; Murphy, 2000). Philosophy serves both critical and regulative functions in school reform. Without it leaders—and the democratic principles they are charged to preserve—are at the mercy of tradition and competing external agendas. As Grace (2000) notes, leadership preparation that focuses solely upon the technical and managerial agendas of schooling compromise humane, ethical, pedagogical, and educative values in education. Further, such foci ignore critical social needs involving social equity and inclusivity. However, if the foundations remain a key element within leadership preparation programs, then programs are able to support moral as well as professional aims:

> The conception of a profession involved not simply a utilitarian business of acquiring technical skills but rather the shaping of humane practitioners, capable for example, of independent and informed ethical judgment and possessing a wider vision of the place of their expertise within the real of a broader intellectual culture. (Beck, 1999, p. 226)

The fact that states are making radical shifts in leadership preparation without sufficient empirical or theoretical warrant is very troubling. Because professors of educational leadership have not clearly articulated an empirically or theoretically grounded argument regarding the preparation of school leaders, we have very little means of response to these new policies. As a result, theory itself often becomes the victim as programs are redesigned for efficiency and for the approving nod of the practitioners served. These shifts have far-reaching consequences, as a generation of school leaders is prepared without adequate capacity to reflect deeply and systematically about their work. Theory is not a luxury that should be saved for Ph.D. programs removed from the daily work of schools. It allows leaders to experience more meaningful inclusion of different ideas (Dewey, 1933, 1938, 1991; Paul & Marfo, 2001; Short & Rinehard, 1993). Theory offers a productive and moral integration of diverse images of possibility in schools. Without it, leaders are susceptible to simplistic solutions or, more likely, to following mindless dictates of politicians and pundits. As such, more than the general quality of leadership preparation is at stake when theory is removed from leadership programs. The very democratic nature of schools is at risk. As Grace (2000) warns, leadership preparation that eschews theory,

> will be detrimental to humane and ethical values in education, to educative and pedagogic values, to social and professional relations within schools, to constructs of educational community and collegiality and to commitments to greater social equity and inclusiveness. (p. 235)

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