Responsibility and Accountability in Educational Leadership

Keeping Democracy and Social Justice Central to Reform

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University programs in educational leadership have been criticized for failing to prepare effective leaders for our nation's schools. Many of these critics are demanding significant changes to leadership preparation programs, however, amidst these strident calls for change there has been very little dialogue about or consensus on what we as members of a democratic society believe capable educational leaders ought to know and be able to do.

There has been, without question, a persistent demand for holding both leaders and teachers accountable for increasing test scores in schools, particularly in schools serving impoverished children and youth. This concern for increasing test scores and holding educational leaders and teachers accountable for student achievement is central to government education policy and it is dramatically reshaping policies and practices in schools across the country, particularly, in schools serving impoverished children and youth. This concern for increasing educational achievement and demanding greater accountability is, also, forcing change in many educational leadership preparation programs. Professors all over the country are redesigning their curriculum to address the new instructional demands being placed on school leaders.

However, as professors rethink what their preparation programs ought to look like in light of current directions in U.S. education policy, I think, as a field, we need to balance this call for a greater emphasis on instructional leadership and accountability in leadership preparation with other vitally important goals, goals that, ultimately, shape the kind of schools and communities we wish to

create, and, ultimately, the kind of society we want to be. When capable educational leaders embrace the broader purposes of education for increasing social justice for children in a democratic society, they can have an enormous impact on the lives of children and families in their communities. Like John Dewey (1916), I believe that a good society is a quest that must actively involve all its members; this is a quest for a society that is both democratic and socially just and it must be pursued by the men and women who lead our government as well as by those who head our public institutions, especially schools. In schools, this quest can only be achieved if our leaders understand the critical role they play in enhancing democracy in their school communities and the enormous power they have to work toward greater social justice through education.

I believe that the women and men who lead our schools bear a greater responsibility for the moral state of our schools and classrooms. I also believe that they have a moral obligation to use their position of leadership to increase educational equity and advance educational opportunity for all children in a democratic society. These beliefs have strong ramifications for designing leadership preparation programs that prepare leaders who understand their democratic responsibilities, appreciate the limitations of their expertise in a racially, ethnically, and economically diverse and divided nation, and value inclusive processes for effective decision making.

I recognize that a greater emphasis on teaching and learning is needed in many leadership preparation programs, particularly in those programs that cling to business-oriented and managerial models that have, historically, ignored issues of teaching and learning in their curricula. These programs emphasize finance and budget, organization theory, personnel management, and change theory to name a few. I believe that this curriculum still has a place in the effective preparation of leaders for socially just schools in a democratic society; however, they are not sufficient for preparing leaders who are capable of grappling with the shifting political and moral terrain of education today.

Linda McNeil (2000) points out, rightly I think, that:

> We have never known more about how children develop and learn. We have never known more about cognition and the brain and the effects of caring and community on children's growth and development . . . So, how is it possible that we have implemented a system of accountability and assessment that has narrowed rather than expanded the possibilities for children's growth, development and learning through education? (p. 271)

McNeil's concern about the narrowing effects of test driven reform in schools today, particularly in schools serving impoverished children and youth, provides wise caution for reformers of leadership preparation programs. Certainly, one important component of enhancing the life chances of children is to teach them how to read, write, and think. So, good leaders for our schools do need to know when learning is occurring as well as when it is not and be able to make adjustments when they

are needed. However, the adjustments that leaders in economically impoverished schools must be capable of making to ensure educational opportunity are rarely as simple as following a scope and sequence chart, or making certain that teachers are following the prescribed grade level curriculum and teaching the content that will be tested on mandated assessments. In fact, these approaches to teaching and learning in schools, particularly in economically impoverished communities, are often undermining rather than enhancing educational opportunity.

What priorities, then, ought to guide our thinking when revising leadership programs for public schools that are dedicated to enhancing social justice in a democratic society? I believe that one of the greatest challenges facing educational leaders today is knowing how to enhance the capabilities and life chances of economically impoverished children and youth within a context of high stakes testing and increased accountability. School leaders today can easily get caught up in the volatile winds of market-driven reform and test-based accountability, and they can quickly lose sight of what it takes to create a school community that supports the broader learning and life needs of children and their families. This is why well-prepared leaders need to understand both the logic and the limits of using test-based assessments to enhance learning. They also need to be clear about what their responsibilities are as leaders in schools, and what they truly believe they ought to be held accountable for doing in the schools and communities they serve.

As professors of educational leadership, we must take current pressures for increasing accountability in schools and in our leadership preparation programs seriously. However, I believe that we can and must do a better job of defining what we think responsible educational leaders who are working within a context of racial, ethnic, and class inequity ought to know and be able to do to enhance the life chances of children and youth. I believe that our best leadership preparation programs develop leaders who are capable of and committed to increasing *real* educational opportunity for children and youth.

Capable leaders, for example, know that their responsibility is to ensure that children are being helped, not harmed, by the policies that they are enforcing. For example, in New York City, many newly arrived immigrant children who do not speak English are being tested in English after being in the country for just one year. Although this policy was designed in hopes of moving immigrant children quickly into speaking English and helping them to progress academically, it is not working as it was intended. Many principals and teachers have found that the impact of this policy on the confidence, self-esteem, and motivation of immigrant children has been more harmful than helpful. Situations like this illuminate the importance of developing capable leaders who have the political savvy, professional integrity, and moral courage to not only implement education policy as designed, but to interrupt problematic policies and practices when they see that they are harming rather than helping children to learn and to come into full being. This is what it truly means to be a responsible educational leader; a leader who takes his/her accountability for each child's learning and well-being seriously. To

adequately support academic achievement, I believe that leaders must also pay attention to the mental and emotional health of children and youth and to their concerns for safety if schools are to create a context where children can thrive in classrooms and not be discouraged by overwhelming stress, fear, and anxiety.

Although it is unpopular to say in this current "no excuses" context of education, the "achievement problem" for impoverished youth or the so called "achievement gap" does not emanate from schools or their instructional practices alone. Often, what we call learning problems are really problems that have been fueled by years of social, labor, and federal educational policies that are leaving too many poor families without work or support in a fragile economy. When poor families lose work, for example, the lives of families and their children are thrown into chaos, causing them to move frequently, forcing them to search for work and new places to live, and forcing children to miss school or change schools frequently. Children whose parents must work two or three jobs to support the family are also engaged in the family struggle to survive. This struggle often leaves children to care for other children at home with too little time, energy, or ability to support academic success. School leaders cannot change the impoverished conditions in which many children live; however, they can provide better support systems that effectively address the broader needs of children and youth, thereby, enhancing their *real* opportunities to achieve.

At New York University, for example, we have addressed our concern for preparing leaders who can support children and their families more broadly by creating courses on advocacy education that engage students in demographic analysis and asset mapping in their school communities. Through these courses, students learn how to create needed links between schools, academic support programs, and other social, economic, and human service agencies serving poor communities. These support networks are most successful when they are designed to address the broader needs of impoverished children and their families, not just the academic needs of students. The real educational opportunities of poor children are often undermined because schools have no good responses to the problems that arise in economically vulnerable families.

When capable leaders listen to the stories that academically talented youth tell about why they feel forced into dropping out of school, they begin to understand why the mantras we use with students, like: "focus on your schoolwork" is naive and unworkable in the lives of many children and their families. No high school student, for example, should feel forced into quitting school to take care of an ill mother and a little brother while the father works long hours to support the family and pay mounting medical bills. Further, no 15-year-old should face dropping out of school to avoid the psychological fear and daily trauma of violence in a troubled school and community without needed protection, intervention, guidance, and support. Leadership preparation programs can help future school leaders by teaching them how to develop valuable community networks to support the real needs of the children and families they serve.

In sum, I believe that if we are to create the leaders we need for impoverished school communities, we must prepare women and men who are capable of leading deliberative school communities that interrogate rather than avoid the enduring inequities that undermine student achievement and mask the *real* issues that undermine the educational opportunity and life chances of impoverished children and youth. When we find that poor children do less well on achievement tests, for example, capable leaders feel compelled to find solutions to that problem. However, if they are convinced that all solutions to the low achievement of poor children are instruction related, they will surely fail to increase real educational opportunity for many children. Instead, we must prepare leaders who are capable of organizing school communities around enhancing the real freedoms and opportunities that children and youth have to learn. They must recognize that the academic child is not easily separated from the social, emotional, and economic turmoil that often undermines his/her real opportunities to learn. Deliberative processes with children and their families can interrupt problematic beliefs that consistently blame impoverished children and youth for failing to thrive in schools that were never designed to serve them. However, if school leaders are to lead effective deliberative processes in school communities, they will need skills and orientations to leadership that are vastly different from the competencies that are currently being called for to support test-based reform and accountability in schools today.

References

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About the Author

Professor Colleen Larson teaches courses at New York University's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education and Human Development and engages in scholarship to understand how leadership, policy, and practice impact the educational opportunities and life chances of impoverished children and youth. Most recently, her research examines the capability approach as development for understanding and enhancing institutional policy and practice in industrialized and developing nations. Illustrative publications include: "Sinking Like Quicksand: Expanding Educational Opportunity for Young Men of Color" (with N. S. Anderson), in *Educational Administration Quarterly, 45*(1), *2009*; "Leadership for Social Justice" (with K. Murtadha), *NSSE Handbook*, University of Chicago Press, 2002; and, *The Color of Bureaucracy* (with C. J. Ovando), Wadsworth Press; 2001. She may be reached via e-mail at: clarson4@mac.com