21st-Century Priorities for Leadership Education and Prospective School Leaders

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What are the major priorities for preparing educational leaders for their work in school communities? Clues to this question are nestled within higher education curricula. The curriculum taught to educational leadership students in my Educational Leadership and Cultural Foundations Department embodies the moral vision of what we want prospective school leaders to become. The courses (and our overall curriculum, which includes how we organize faculty searches) are anchored in a social justice epistemology expressed as the Statement of Commitments. This academic covenant resulted from a long process of grappling with how to best convey our passion for preparing students to not just administrate or reform educational communities but to make them socially just. At the master's level, students learn about leadership for teaching and learning, teacher rights and assessment, and the cultural and political dimensions of schooling. At the doctoral level, courses address such issues as race, class, and gender dynamics; ethics and education; and schools as centers of inquiry. Technocratic, state-driven priorities for school leaders that highlight finance, management, and testing are not ignored. We push against and address such organizational content as an integral part of our vision of an equitable education and a just accountability system for schools.

Hence our students are exposed to priorities for exemplary leadership that are guided by a covenant that perpetuates John Dewey's vision of free but disciplined inquiry. We see educational work as value laden, and we are transparent about our values of equity and excellence, social justice, and civic activism.

Candidates and enrolled students alike write about their priorities for schooling within the context of our guiding beliefs. We want to inspire in students a desire to utilize their roles as educational leaders by eliciting their creative engagement in the participation of schooling in democratic ways. Their understandings of the sociopolitical contexts of education are expanded, and they experience internships within low-income urban and rural schools. We envision our students as future activist citizens and learning-oriented leaders—some are drawn to us, even from abroad, because they are already evolving in this direction. Because moral principles function as the norm in our curricula, relationships, and decision making, and because we openly make one another accountable to our beliefs, we feel empowered to make social justice the cornerstone of our world.

The school leaders we teach struggle with the growing complexity that is redefining schooling. We ground the priorities for and standards of schooling in equity and cultural relevance. For example, our students learn that parental involvement, particularly in at-risk schools, is not simply about human resource management; rather, leaders must engage the terrain of school/family relationships and civic deliberation about education, as well as the role of schools, in community transformation.

As morally centered activist-leaders, our students internalize standards for moral reasoning. We encourage them to develop and make transparent, with their teaching faculties, ethical practices consistent with their collective vision. They grapple with moral dilemmas, such as the individual rights of children and families that combat notions of the common good. As they engage in moral reasoning, they learn to identify and, when possible, minimize or even resolve contradictions that arise in daily work. Consequently, school leaders can be guided to make sense of priorities as culturally relevant issues if they have a social justice orientation. This compass must be rooted in an understanding of the governing principles of accountability and democracy. Leaders are constantly confronted with the opposing priorities of accountability and democracy in their work, but they can empower themselves to discover how these can function as interpenetrating forces that influence competing agendas.

Major priorities understood not as principles but skill sets that guide leadership education in preparing leaders for their work of leading schools are viewed differently through social justice lenses. Prevalent 21st-century priorities that governing standards specify, such as innovation, assessment, distributed leadership, and technology, must be vigorously shaped into social justice praxis. Such delineated priorities are otherwise disembodied, lacking an equity focus. They take the reified, traditional form of hierarchical authority, rules and regulations, curricula product adoption, human resources management, and technology efficiency. Technology, for example, can serve as a means for bridging social justice and human services to enhance equity in service delivery to minority and low-income populations. Or it can be utilized as an automated strategy for boosting the efficiency and test scores of schools.

Highly qualified administrators must help teachers prepare students for careers, higher education, citizenship, and global readiness. This is how the national standards in educational leadership read, as well as much of the current literature. But this goal can be integrated into the kaleidoscope of social justice work or can be treated in isolation. Clearly, priorities for leadership must be nurtured within a morally centered social justice framework. For example, future-ready leaders need to know how to innovate by collaborating with partners to facilitate change, remove barriers from learning, and understand global connections. They create a culture that embraces change and make decisions in collaboration with parents and other stakeholders. They also model the use of multiple and authentic assessments to target the skills and knowledge students should learn. High-quality standardized testing is, at minimum, balanced with alternative assessments that inspire creative student learning. These leaders enact a distributed leadership strategy that support teachers' growth through professional learning communities and positive school climates. They understand leadership activity not as the work of single leaders so much as communal participation enacted in complex, interconnected ways. A distributed perspective occurs as principals influence teacher practice as instructional leaders. Cutting-edge technologies not only support teaching and learning but also ensure safety for all, as well as the protection of human dignity.

Priorities for school leadership anchored in a social justice epistemology can enhance administrator advocacy and responsibility. Set adrift of this focus, priorities amplify the inequities and injustices that plague school communities.

About the Author

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