Research on Leadership Education as a Reform Strategy

By Margaret Terry Orr

Leadership education has become the public education reform strategy of the new century. Spotlighting leadership education presumes that improved leadership preparation and development will yield better leadership, management, and organizational practices which, in turn, will improve teaching, student learning and student performance in schools and districts. But the *hows and whats* of leadership preparation have become hotly debated questions in recent years.

Assumptions about effective leadership preparation are reflected in the many efforts to reform graduate preparation programs over the past 30 years, ranging from sharply critical reports from within the field and from outside critics, to foundation intervention and policy mandates (McCarthy, 1999). The efforts extend from the National Policy Board for Educational Administration's outline of program reforms in 1989, to the recommendations of the National Commission for the Advancement of Educational Leaders in 2002 and 2003 (Hull, 2003), to Levine's harsh criticisms in 2005. In addition, national foundations (e.g., Danforth, Wallace and Broad), have promoted innovative graduate programs, state policy reforms, and district leadership education strategies intended to change the focus and means of leadership preparation. Finally, there has been considerable state policy change in certification requirements and preparation program registration. Most significant are national standards—the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Council (ISLLC) standards— which outline expectations for effective educational leadership. By 2005, 46 states adopted leadership standards for administrator certification and preparation programs. Forty-one of those states adopted the ISLLC standards or standards aligned ISLLC (Sanders & Simpson, 2005). Some states also established requirements for program content, graduate credit hours for field experience, competency assessments, and testing of program graduates prior to certification or licensing.

The developers of the ISLLC standards based their choices on research about effective educational leadership and thus, expected their standards to influence leadership preparation programs. Little attention, however, has been given to research on how leaders are prepared or how preparation research has influenced the field of graduate preparation. Until recently, research on leadership preparation found its way to conference presentations

and unpublished reports (Orr, 2006). Only a small body of empirical work reached publication (Murphy & Vriesenga, 2005).

Field-initiated research on the development and diffusion of innovative approaches to leadership preparation, have potential to serve as powerful change strategies for the profession. Additionally, state policies related to standards, program requirements, and certification and licensure of program graduates provide strong impetus and direction for leadership preparation program change. Program quality, however, appears to be most influenced by the innovations that emerge from field-initiated research and its dissemination. Case study profiles of program reform (e.g. Carr, 2005) clearly illustrate the interplay between policy mandates and the adoption of new approaches based on research and development, in programs' efforts to improve how they prepare aspiring leaders.

Thus, while the research in the leadership preparation field has been characterized as scant and of limited methodological quality (McCarthy, 1999; Murphy & Vriesenga, 2005), the studies have served to foment ideas and diffuse new approaches for educating administrative aspirants. There was a time, for example, when cohort groups, action research, on-line courses, and portfolios were new ideas for program design and delivery. Through several, albeit small scale, studies, researchers examined these design and delivery strategies in an effort to understand their educating purpose, their use and contributions to student learning, and their influence on leadership development. Currently, the strategies noted above have become common to programs nationwide, primarily through the naturally-occurring diffusion and adoption processes. Moreover, the field has utilized the extensive research on adult learning to improve the quality and effectiveness of leadership program field experiences. When adult learning theory was connected to leadership development, field experiences became developmental, with infused reflective practices that augmented the learning. Field-initiated research documented the strengthening the mentoring roles of university and field-based supervisors.

Furthur evidence of research as a reform strategy can be found in professional forums, like the American Educational Research Association through its Division A and the Teaching in Educational Administration Special Interest Group (TEA-SIG), National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA), and University Council of Educational Administration (UCEA). Each has been significantly instrumental in facilitating a research and development approach to innovation and diffusion of new approaches and

understandings about leadership preparation. These professional groups provide the means for encouraging, regularly showcasing, and discussing research strategies and approaches. Two co-sponsored taskforces—the UCEA and TEA-SIG Taskforce on Evaluating Leadership Preparation Programs and the Joint Taskforce on Research in Educational Leadership Preparation provide much needed field-wide focus and support for accumulated inquiry into core questions on effective preparation, quality research methodology, and collaborative efforts to gain meaningful economics of scale in research studies. The UCEA and TEA-SIG Taskforce, specifically, has focused its inquiry on the connections between preparation strategies and program design and the impacts on graduates' learning, leadership advancement, leadership practice, and school improvements, as represented in figure 1 (Orr, 2005). The research seeks to make explicit the embedded theories that inform program designs and core instructional strategies, looking for the relationship to the outcomes (as figure 1 model). The intent is to test effectiveness and provide feedback to our programs and the field as a whole for further reform.

In conclusion, the **Journal of Research on Leadership Education** will provide impetus for more and better research on leadership preparation and leadership development. The publication of high quality scholarship will only elevate the importance of systematic inquiry into effective leadership preparation, as well as leadership's singular influence on educational improvement. Such focus will escalate our understanding of how leadership education can effectively contribute to educational reform.

Figure 1: Longitudinal Evaluation Design for Leadership Preparation Program Impacts
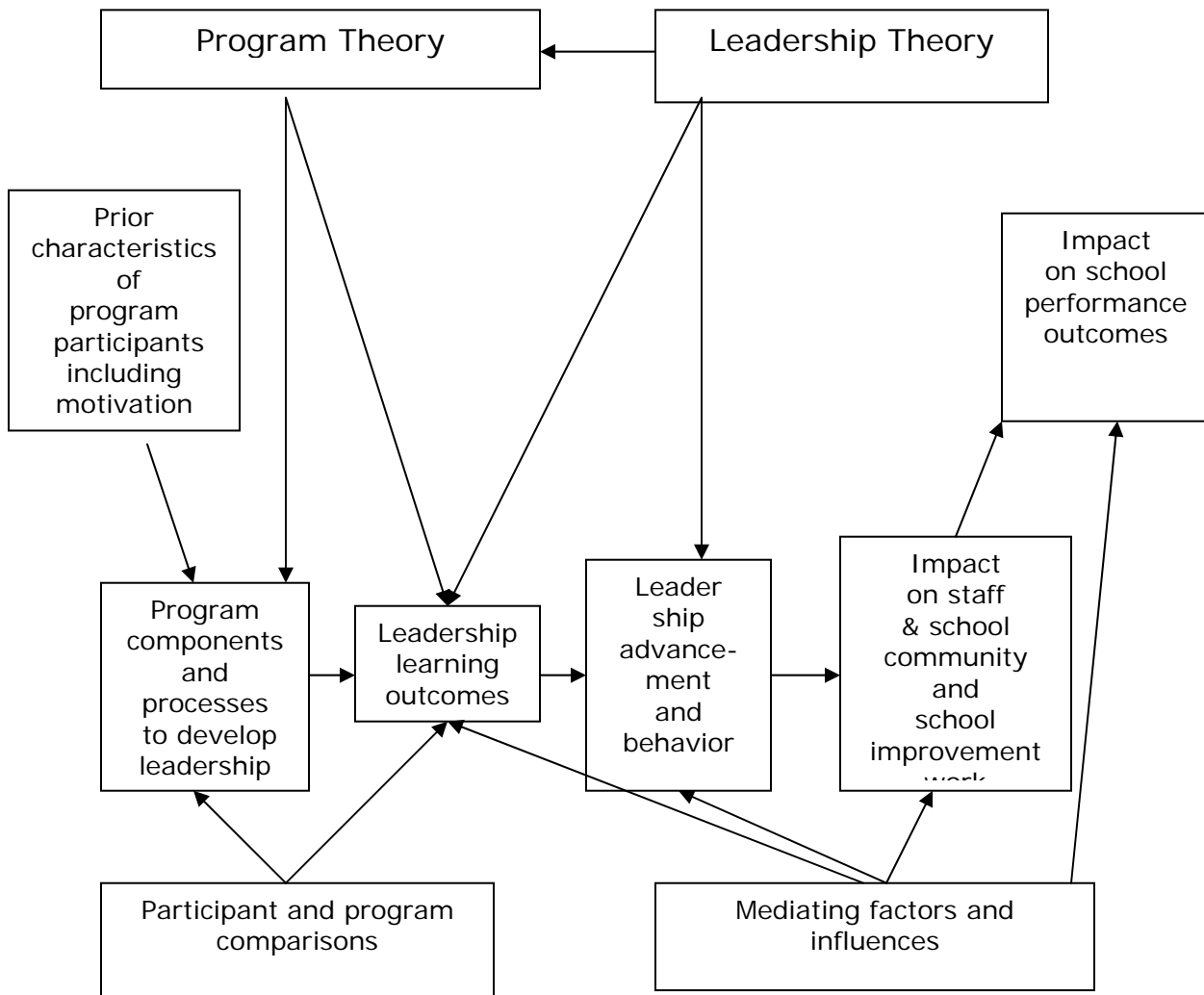
Source: Orr, 2005

References

Carr, C. S. (2005). Evolution of a leadership preparation program in the 21st century, *NCPEA Education Leadership Review, 6*(1), 33-41.

Hull, A. (2003, Spring). Grappling with the universities roles in school leadership preparation: From Wingspread to Gateway. *UCEA Review*, 14.

Levine, A. (2005). *Educating school leaders.* The Education Schools Project. Retrieved April 30, 2005 from http://www.edschools.org/pdf/Final313.pdf

McCarthy, M. (1999). The evolution of educational leadership preparation programs. Murphy, J. & Louis, K. S. (eds.) *Handbook of research on educational administration: A project of the American Educational Research Association*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 119-139.

Murphy, J. & Vriesenga, M. (2004). Research on preparation programs in educational administration: An analysis. *UCEA Monograph Series*. Columbia, MO: UCEA.

National Policy Board for Educational Administration. *Improving the Preparation of School Administrators: An Agenda for Reform.* Charlottesville, VA: Author, 1989. 33 pages. ED 310 495.

Orr, M. T. (2005). *Comparing leadership development from pipeline, to preparation and practice.* Paper presented at the 2005 UCEA Convention. Nashville, TN.

Orr, M. T. (forthcoming, 2006, March). Mapping Leadership Preparation Innovation in Our Nation's Schools of Education*. Phi Delta Kappan.*

Sanders, N. M., & Simpson, J. (2005). State policy framework to develop highly qualified administrators. Washington, DC: CCSSO.

Margaret Terry Orr is Program Director and faculty, Bank Street College, New York, New York, USA.