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The Influence of a Doctoral Program on Growth as a Scholar-Practitioner Leader: Listening to the Voices of the Graduates

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Abstract

In response to criticisms that universities offer curricula that are neither coherent nor relevant (Teitel, 2006), many educational leadership programs have adopted scholar-practitioner programs designed to increase relevancy to school administration as well as cohere with the goals and realities of public school education. This case study was designed to address the following research question: In what ways has the graduate's role as an educational leader been impacted by participation in a scholar-practitioner educational leadership doctoral program? Findings revealed the doctoral program's impact in areas of writing and research, change, reflection, criticality, and scholar-practitioner leadership. The study has significance in continuing the dialogue of determination of the impact of educational leadership doctoral programs on practice.

Introduction

University preparation programs for educational leaders have been criticized for failing to provide a suitable curriculum to prepare students to demonstrate the skills and competencies necessary to meet the challenges inherent in the increasingly complex demands of their school leadership roles (Levine, 2005). In the pressure-cooker world of high-stakes testing and increasing accountability, it is imperative that school leaders are

prepared to undertake the challenges inherent in such politically charged realms, armed with academic perspective and practical knowledge and skills.

Teitel (2006) stated, “The two biggest criticisms of university curricula in educational administration are the lack of coherence and the lack of relevance” (p. 502). A grave disservice is done to university program graduates who enter leadership positions woefully unprepared for the awaiting firestorm. Treading their way through the demands of federally mandated accountability measures such as *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) and the maze of politically polarizing issues affecting schools, school leaders will need to be both scholars and practitioners to meet the challenges of school improvement such as closing the achievement gap and raising the academic performance of all students (Reyes & Wagstaff, 2005).

In response to these criticisms, many university educational leadership programs have developed innovatively designed programs with a view toward preparing the educational leaders of the 21st century. Yet these “new and improved” programs have “gone largely unnoticed” (Orr, 2006, p. 492). It is important to provide program evaluation over time and to hear the follow-up responses of graduates from such programs to discern key practices, processes, and results of the program. There is a need to identify the impact of an educational leadership doctoral program on a student’s growth as a scholar-practitioner leader who will contribute positively to school improvement efforts. This study was designed to address the following research question: In what ways has the graduate’s role as an educational leader been impacted by participation in an educational leadership doctoral program?

Review of Literature and Application of Themes to the Design of the Program

The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defined scholar as one who has mastered some academic discipline and defined a practitioner as one who practices a profession. By this definition, a scholar-practitioner would be one who uses his or her knowledge and desire to learn while actively engaged in the occupation. As in the case of a successful school leader, a scholar-practitioner is a school leader who uses what he or she has learned, desires to learn more, and actively participates as a school leader. Because successful school leadership improves classroom instruction and positively impacts student learning (Schlechty, 2001), the school leader must seek informational input from data, research, studies, examinations of best practices, feedback from stakeholders within the school and feedback from those outside the school. A successful school leader is reflective, has a clear vision, achieves a shared vision among stakeholders, effectively fosters communication, grows leaders, utilizes models of distributive leadership, and creates an environment of collaboration by building and maintaining positive relationships with all stakeholders (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005). The literature shows that effective leaders display

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common characteristics: reflection, shared vision, communication, ongoing leadership development, distributive leadership, collaboration, and relationships. The program at Stephen F. Austin is designed with the scholar-practitioner in mind, and these common characteristics are evident in the doctoral educational leadership program.

Reflection

The scholar-practitioner reflects on data, feedback, research, study, and findings of best practices, thoughts, and beliefs to form the basis for future action. Duignan and Bhindi (1996) stressed that a leader cannot effectively lead others if he or she has not formed a vision for the organization through intense reflection. While much reflection is self-reflection, some reflective time is spent in collaborative conversations that help to refine and frame beliefs. Social relationships are an important part of reflection as they provide additional informational input. Leithwood and Riehl (2005) discussed social relationships as a necessary part of group accomplishment. Social relationships are necessary so that collaborative reflection is possible.

Using Reflection in the Educational Leadership Classroom

The scholar-practitioner program at Stephen F. Austin State University was designed to not only incorporate the theories of reflection in the program but also to provide structures for students to engage in reflection. Jenlink (2002), one of the key figures in the development and design of the program, states that scholar-practitioners “must be able to focus on the socio-historical nature of the problems and events that define her/his work, identifying particular political, ideological, and social issues that direct the ebb and flow of daily activity” (p. 4). This focus is enabled through assignments that foster reflection. One way this is accomplished in the program is through the use of the post-formal critique (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1999) and an emphasis on critical ontology (Kincheloe, 2003). The curriculum is designed so that students engage in critical reflection to understand self.

Because “the scholar-practitioner finds that s/he is asked to function as a self-conscious, autonomous, and authentic person in a public space” (Jenlink, 2005, p. 3) when engaged in the role of educational leader, the design of the program is such that students are expected to perform in this function in the educational leadership classroom. Jenlink (2005) also maintained that

The idea of an intellectual life deeply connected to the pragmatic and political work of education suggests that we must focus on our selves, develop a particular character or way of being as scholar-practitioners, and make a commitment to our work. (p. 4)

Exercises in critical self-reflection give educational leadership students preparation for committed and authentic presences in their fields. Critical self-reflection is necessary because “learning to lead for the scholar-practitioner is concerned less with transitional orientations of knowledge and inquiry and more with engaging in a ‘new epistemology’ of knowledge and practice articulated through the inquiry of praxis” (Jenlink, 2006, p. 57). If educational leadership students are expected to merge theory and practice in the workforce, it is logical that this cohesion of theory and practice take place in the educational leadership classroom to engage students in the solidification of self-purpose. Students are similarly engaged in collaborative reflection to understand the role of leaders as a collective to avoid “the limitations of single-minded approaches to practice” (Jenlink, 2005, p. 5).

Shared Vision

Through reflection, the successful scholar-practitioner school leader develops solid beliefs about the purpose, goals, and methods of his or her profession, which frame and outline the basis for a vision and provides the direction and foundation for goals. As the scholar-practitioner shares his or her vision, opportunities for reform begin. Sergiovanni (1999a) stressed that vision is more significant than a slogan; it is founded in passionate beliefs that become the leader’s source of authority. Authentic visions inspire others to action: “There can be no leadership if there is nothing important to follow” (Sergiovanni, 1999a, p. 3). A process must be in place to educate leaders on forming authentic and effective visions (Reyes & Wagstaff, 2005), which then establish direction for the organization (Liethwood & Riehl, 2005).

The vision of the successful school leader becomes a shared vision when active participants are involved and have ownership with the vision as it becomes the force that drives them. Sergiovanni (1999a) emphasized that the diversity of participants must be brought together through shared ideas, shared principles, and shared purposes. The successful scholar-practitioner school leader ensures that all participants are involved in the visioning process so that a sense of belonging is created that strengthens the bond of unified and purposeful action. Senge (2000) related the importance of shared vision: “One is hard pressed to think of any organization that has sustained some measure of greatness in the absence of goals, values, and missions that become deeply shared throughout the organization” (p. 18). The successful scholar-practitioner school leader not only recognizes the importance of collaboration to create a shared vision, he or she also has the communication and commitment to engage members of the organization in a deeply shared, authentic experience of the vision.

Shared Vision in the Educational Leadership Classroom

Students in the educational leadership classroom are provided opportunities to engage in critical discussions and collaboration. The students are organized into cohorts of

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approximately 15 students. Each cohort takes the same sequence of courses to the point of candidacy and elective courses. This structure enables the students to engage in collaborative sessions within the classroom and emphasizes the importance of creating structures of collaboration in the workplace. Students are trained over the period of years in the program to foster collaboration and to engage in collaboration so this skill will be achieved in the students' places of employment. Jenlink (2006) maintained that for the scholar-practitioner, "there is not a one-best way or means, but multiple perspectives and means of solving problems and decisions" (p. 64). In order for students to internalize this tenet, it must be practiced in the educational leadership program. This is achieved at the university through collaborative projects and the cohort design.

Communication

Effective, dialogic communication in which information flows both to and from leaders and other members of the organization is essential to successful leadership. Senge (2000) explained, "The discipline of team learning starts with the capacity of members of a team to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine dialogue" (p. 19). Without the ability to enter into authentic communication, shared visions will not be possible. Deal and Peterson (2000) stressed the importance of communication to relate hopes and dreams of the school and refine and refocus the school's purpose and mission. Communication is an ongoing process and does not end with the creation and sharing of the vision. The successful scholar-practitioner utilizes communication to promote thought in others by posing reflective questions when observing instruction and interactions in the classroom (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005).

Communication in the Educational Leadership Classroom

The students in the educational leadership program are expected to engage in critical self-reflection to form solid identities and values as leaders, and are expected to collaborate to create shared visions of the future and ideals for the future of education. These practices must then be shared in the respective workplaces through communication with employees in the field. The collaboration and critical discussions that take place in the educational leadership classroom are models for the types of collaboration and discussions that should take place in the field. Professors take the role of facilitator, guide, or mentor who designs scaffolds for learning. The communication that takes place between professor and student, and between student and student, serves as model for the modes of dialogue necessary for effective scholar-practitioners:

"As the scholar-practitioner interacts with others within a community of practice, his or her scholarly practice works with the practice of others to create a *bricolage*, or a composite of methods, materials, actions and experiences, and sensations and perceptions" (Jenlink, 2006, p. 60).

Fostering Future Leadership Development

Successful scholar-practitioner school leaders foster future leadership by encouraging growth and offering opportunities for leadership activities. Quantz, Rogers, and Dantley (1991) summarized, “Leaders do not gather followers, but help promote conditions and discourse which cultivate more leaders” (p. 108). Gardner (2000) stressed that young people in the field should be encouraged to move toward leadership models that match their strengths. Leithwood and Riehl (2005) argued that professional growth of staff members must be stimulated through examples of good leadership.

Although the purpose of a vision is to provide direction for the school, the utilization of a working vision provides opportunity to foster the growth and development of new leaders. Leithwood and Riehl (2005) related that the identification and articulation of a vision leads to increased communication in which opportunities for growth are identified. Kochan and Reed (2005) defined leaders as “individuals who engage in visionary idealism...and help others to do the same” (p. 79). Successful leaders foster leadership growth by providing leadership opportunities in the school and by building confidence in demonstrating respect. Reyes and Wagstaff (2005) identified the facilitation of teacher growth by the demonstration of the principal’s trust and respect.

Fostering Future Leadership Development in the Educational Leadership Classroom

In the educational leadership program, the cohort design facilitates leadership development by providing various models (Gardner, 2000) through the cohort members as well as through the professors. These myriad examples of leadership help to grow new leadership styles and provide opportunities for participants to experience different modes of leadership (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005). Faculty members in the program are approachable and supportive. Each cohort member is assigned a doctoral advisor whose function is not merely to guide decisions in course registration. Instead, the doctoral advisor is present and engaged in fostering leadership growth in the students through dialogue, guidance, and the providing of professional opportunity.

In addition, during the first year of the cohort the courses are designed so that students are engaged in action research. The products of this action research are then presented at a conference where the cohort presents as a group. Throughout the research and presentation process, the doctoral professors provide the structure and support to students for success. Once the students have been through the research and presentation process, they are better prepared to engage in action research in their respective places of work and better prepared and more confident to present at professional conferences. Without the engagement and support of the professors, the cohort members — especially those in public school administration without the exposure to higher education apart from their course work — might be less likely to engage in action research and

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conference presentations. The program is designed to grow future educational leaders who engage in research and in professional dialogue with the academic community.

Distributive Leadership

In addition to leadership opportunities for growing leaders, benefits also exist for the successful school leader to help support the school vision. Sergiovanni (1999a) related that the principal should be a leader of leaders as he or she develops instructional leadership in teachers. Gardner (2000) asserted that his use of the word “leader” implies not an individual but a team. He stated that, “No individual has all the skills — and certainly not the time — to carry out all the complex tasks of contemporary leadership” (p. 12). The demands on the role of the leader necessitate the need for fostering leadership. Quantz, Rogers, and Dantley (1991) further supported distributing leadership, stating that, “transformative leadership achieves its power and authority not through domination but through democracy and emancipation. Transformative leadership is building on the idea of lowering authoritarianism while raising authority and responsibility (p. 105). As leadership is shared, the school becomes more cohesive as more people feel ownership and responsibility in the outcomes.

Distributive Leadership in the Educational Leadership Classroom

The professors in the doctoral program model educational leadership by coordinating within the department to teach concepts in many of the courses. For example, when teaching quantitative correlation, one professor coordinated with the psychology department to bring the students first-hand experience running such data. In another course, a professor enlisted doctoral students further along in the program to help explain the dissertation process. The professors model using distributive leadership within the courses — enlisting the help of other departments, other professors, more advanced doctoral cohort members, and present doctoral cohort members. The cohort members themselves are expected to distribute leadership among themselves as they work to complete projects and participate in conferences. Again, students are more likely to engage in these skills in the field if they are modeled and authentically used in the classroom. Jenlink (2005) asserted, “As intellectual, the scholar-practitioner understands that theory has a practical intent” (p. 7). In the program, students not only study the theories of excellent educational leadership, they are also shown the theories in action and are expected to use the theories in everyday practice.

Collaboration and Relationships

A knowledgeable and committed staff wants to share and work together. Energized collaborative sessions are charged with conversations that spark deeper understandings of student learning that refines goals and visions. Senge (2000) related this energy:

“for many, their experience as part of truly great teams stand out as singular periods of life lived to the fullest. Some spend the rest of their lives looking for ways to recapture that spirit” (p. 22). Successful school leaders and scholar-practitioners must build structures that allow for authentic and effective collaboration. Starratt (2001) stressed the importance of purposeful creation of a climate that supports participation and sharing of ideas in an open and honest manner.

Collaboration cannot take place without working to build professional relationships within the organization. Foster (1994) defined leadership as a reciprocal relationship between leaders and followers. In addition, a successful leader knows how to build and maintain positive relationships. In a discussion of authenticity in leadership, Duigan and Bhindi (1996) identified that the quality of relationships influences everything that happens in an organization including the quality of leadership.

Collaboration and Relationships in the Educational Leadership Classroom

The collaboration that takes place between departments, professors, cohorts, and students in the educational leadership program prepares student participants to engage in authentic collaboration in the field. The design of class projects and presentations provides structure for the collaboration to take place (Starratt, 2001), but it is up to the students to make the collaboration happen. It is not that the professors design and mandate the collaboration; instead, they help define leadership as reciprocal through their actions, as suggested by Foster (1994).

Methodology

This case study focused on the reflection of graduates from one university’s doctoral program in educational leadership. In 1997, the Secondary Education and Educational Leadership Department at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas, implemented a doctoral program in educational leadership. Since the program’s inception, there have been seven cohorts of doctoral members to complete the doctoral program, with three cohorts currently in candidacy for program completion. One of the primary tenets of the doctoral program is reflection. It is with this tenet in mind that this case study was designed. The members of the 10th cohort conducted this study in conjunction with two of the doctoral faculty members in an effort to reflect on the tenets, beliefs, and curriculum of the program. The doctoral graduates themselves contributed their insights into the program. By gathering the viewpoints and reflections of the graduates, it is the expectation of the department to improve the cohesion of theory and practice within the program. Extensive data were gathered from the graduates through the use of surveys, interviews, and focus groups. For the purposes of this case study, the interviews and focus groups were analyzed to emphasize the previous graduates’

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qualitative experiences in the program. Separate studies evaluated the quantitative aspects of the growth of the scholar-practitioner.

The purpose of the study was to identify the impact of participation in an educational leadership doctoral program on a student's growth as a scholar-practitioner leader who will contribute positively to school improvement efforts. This study was driven by the following research question: In what ways has the graduate's role as an educational leader been impacted by participation in an educational leadership doctoral program?

The participants for this study represented the first 60 graduates of the educational leadership doctoral program at Stephen F. Austin State University. Each participant currently holds a leadership position in school administration, central office administration, as a service center professional, or in higher education. Additionally, one of the participants holds a leadership position as a hospital administrator. All data were retrieved during the fall semester of 2006 using semi-structured interviews. The transcriptions were categorized by professional position into four different groupings: campus administrators, central office/superintendent, higher education, and a group labeled "Other," which included a hospital administrator and service center professionals. The participants were disaggregated by employment to determine if the scholar-practitioner program had similar impact on graduates as a whole or only on graduates in particular fields. Because the participants in educational leadership programs are in diverse educational situations — teachers, public school administrators, higher education professors, health administrators — it is possible that the program could impact some areas of employment in more profound ways than others. The authors used open-coding for each set of transcripts, disaggregated by employment, to discover major themes that developed from graduates of the educational leadership program. These broad themes included writing and research, change, reflection, criticality, and the scholar-practitioner.

The researchers then analyzed evidence of the impact of the scholar-practitioner program for the specific themes of reflection, shared vision, communication, fostering future leadership, distributive leadership, and collaboration and relationships within the themes discovered in the open-coding. The authors recognized that these themes do not constitute an end-all "formula" for effective leadership; instead, these themes were chosen because the authors were interested if these themes were present in the theories taught in the courses and in the practices of the leaders of the courses, and then were also carried over into the practices of the graduates. The educational leadership program is founded and designed upon the beliefs of the scholar-practitioner, and for the program to reflect these beliefs effectively and authentically, these beliefs must then be carried out by its graduates in practice. The interview questions were derived by the researchers based on the tenets, beliefs, and curriculum currently used by Stephen F. Austin State University's Department of Educational Leadership in the doctoral program.

Findings

Regardless of current position, almost every graduate of the doctoral educational leadership program noted the changes that occurred in his or her core beliefs through reflection as well as obtaining skills and courage to inspire and enact such changes in others, particularly in the realm of social justice. Graduates also noted the attainment of critical skills in research and writing and the marriage of these skills with leadership skills, resulting in a scholar-practitioner persona. The findings were used to draw conclusions to the research question: In what ways has the graduate's role as an educational leader been impacted by participation in an educational leadership doctoral program?

Writing and Research

Campus administrators. Campus administrators discussed the impact of increased knowledge of research skills obtained in the doctoral program as critical in their day-to-day decision making as well as in their long-term planning and evaluating, indicating an impact in the manner in which they use reflection. The role of research for campus administrators who graduated from the doctoral educational leadership program had a direct impact on campus programs. As one principal noted, "I am more aware of how to analytically look at a program" and determine "what impact we are having in a change." The interviews with campus administration also revealed that the research skills obtained were being passed to campus personnel, indicating the graduates had internalized skills in sharing visions, fostering future leadership, distributing leadership, and collaboration. One principal stated that "what I do now as a result of being in the program is I am consistently and constantly looking for new research with my staff." Overall, research was an important skill to campus administrators because it directly impacted decision-making concerning programs and revealed that campus administrators enlisted the leadership of staff, thereby fostering future leadership and indicating collaboration and the building of relationships.

Central office/district administrators. In contrast with campus administrators, central office or district administrators, particularly superintendents and assistant superintendents, attributed much of their success specifically to writing skills obtained in the doctoral educational leadership program. One superintendent stated that she has "been able to get grants for our district" and while in the program "wrote a grant for one of our schools that was funded for \$450,000." Communicating research findings in writing seemed to be a more critical skill for central office and district administrators who needed to use research and then relay it to school boards, campus administrators, and the community whereas campus administrators used the research skills to foster growth in their staff and develop action plans and make decisions.

Higher education. The emphasis on writing for the graduates of the doctoral education program who have gone on to careers in higher education was the equation of writing with

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“deep inquiry.” For these graduates, writing and research went hand-in-hand, whereas the graduates in campus administration stressed research and the graduates in central office/district administration stressed writing. This finding is contrary to the basis of the scholar-practitioner ideal, which seeks to merge theory and practice, research and writing. Those in higher education — not those in the public school field — were the ones who specifically indicated a merging of research and writing, exposing the possible need for further emphasis of the interrelatedness of these two areas in the program.

Indeed, for those in higher education the research was still necessary to guide decisions and evaluate needs, but the writing itself was a critical skill in communicating the research findings and bringing those findings to the academic community. One graduate stated that research and writing “provided a way to be, to think, and to do in relation to both my professional life and my personal life. I can no longer separate the scholar from the practitioner from the leader.” This speaks to the cohesiveness of the critical skills taught in the doctoral program in educational leadership and the meaningful changes that occur in its higher education participants as well as the actions that result in the educational community from these changes. While the specific themes of shared vision, fostering future leadership, distributive leadership, and collaboration and relationships to not directly relate to the theme of writing and research based on the coding of the higher education transcripts, the merging of theory in practice in this subgroup is noteworthy.

Other educational leaders. Consistent with the findings for district/central office administrators, other educational leaders who have graduated from the doctoral program for educational leaders indicated the critical skill of writing was the key to their success. One graduate working as a chief executive and nursing officer outside the educational setting shared that the research and writing skills obtained in the program “have helped me to secure over \$1 million in grants over a three-year period.” Interestingly, none in either category that indicated the impact of writing on the funding on grants then went on to comment on the impact of the grant itself on learning, student achievement, or the success of the organization. This reveals a contradiction in some of the other findings in which graduates indicated participation in the program connected them with the “big picture” and revealed a lack of recognition of the relationship between the skill of writing or communicating with changes in their programs.

Change

Campus administrators. Graduates in campus administration indicated that an understanding of the change process was a critical skill obtained in the program. For some, the change process was personal; for others, seeing change occur in others and recognizing the need for that change took on a spiritual meaning. As one graduate stated,

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“Whenever we reach a point within ourselves and reach out to another person and inner connect, that web of inner-connectedness and influence on their life” gives new meaning to leadership, suggesting reflection and relationships have profound effect on campus administrators. The changes that graduates recognized within this category showed an impact in the area of relationships, communication, fostering future leadership.

For some individuals, the meaning of change was more institutional. For those individuals, the changes experienced in the doctoral program permeated to the campus and the meaning of change became a driving force, a motivator — showing impact in the area of collaboration and relationships. As a graduate stated, “Change will happen...it may be miniscule but it will be there. We are not aware of how much we impact other people, and that awareness comes throughout the doctoral program.” The changes that occurred in the graduates who were in campus administration positions tended to be more personal and tended to reflect a change in perspective and understanding of their roles in the “big picture.” This is indicative of the nature of campus administration, which takes on a more personal role as relationships are developed with staff and students on a day-to-day and very practical basis.

Many graduates also indicated that the program changed them because it gave them courage. One graduate stressed, “I recognize now that five years ago I would not be doing the things I am doing now to stand up for certain things if I had not completed the doctoral program.” The personal changes the graduates experienced indicated a cohesion between professional and personal lives, a cohesion between scholar and practitioner, a cohesion between learned and lived experiences.

Central office/district administrators. On the personal level, campus administrators consistently noted the changes that occurred in their thinking on social justice, democracy, communication. As a graduate stated, “When you read widely, you become more globally minded.” The personal change also influenced institutional change. Graduates noted the critical skills learned in the program that helped them to lead change in others — or foster future leadership and provide opportunities for distributive leadership. Another graduate stressed, “Everybody in our cohort became change agents. This was affecting the community and their schools.” The graduates also indicated that the personal changes which were guiding and affecting their decisions were fostered by the faculty. A graduate emphasized, “We have been taught to be change leaders in the right way, and I am thankful for that.” Understanding the change process is a critical skill fostered through the doctoral program. Changes that take place in graduates were noted to be significant and to have an impact on changes the graduates then made in their schools. In addition, both campus administrators and central office administrators noted one significant change in the amount of courage they gained in the program. A superintendent noted, “The greatest impact the program has had on my role as an

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education leader has been in the area of courage. I feel that I will be successful in any area of education that I choose.” In order to make changes in schools, graduates not only had to experience change on a professional and personal level but they also had to develop courage to take the role of the scholar-practitioner.

Higher education. The graduates in the educational doctoral program who now have positions in higher education indicated change was a critical skill but pointed more to institutional change and courses in change theories rather than personal change. In fact, one graduate noted that the program “verified and solidified” her principles rather than changing them. These graduates indicated that learning how to facilitate change and to make changes in others was a significant skill learned in the program, consistent with fostering future leadership but contrary to the tenet of reflection. The skills related to change were more emphasized in these graduates rather than any actual personal changes taking place. Again, the responses from graduates in higher education revealed a disjoint not evident for graduates in public administration.

Other educational leaders. Interestingly, the graduates classified as other educational leaders — those either in practice as consultants, in the medical field, or in regional service centers — did not note change as an area of significant impact. This could be related to the roles these leaders play outside of the realms of public education and higher education. In addition, these leaders do not witness the direct impact of change as the other graduates do and may not see this as an area of significance because it is outside their realms of experience. This is a possible area of improvement in the program: providing opportunities for students to be part of actual change processes could lead to students in this field impacting more change after graduation.

Reflection

Campus administrators. Reflection was the most consistently cited critical skill gained by all graduates of the educational leadership doctoral program. Reflection — one of the tenets chosen for analysis by the researchers — was often explicitly cited in conjunction with and a necessary predecessor to significant change in self or institution. A campus principal stated, “The most important component in the scholar-practitioner leader program is the reflection piece...really understanding yourself and knowing why you are doing what you are doing...It helped me grow to recognize my challenges, my strengths as a leader, but also my [constraints].” The campus administrators indicated that the practice of reflection eventually made them more acutely and immediately aware of their own actions. This caused the administrators to also consider the impact on others of each decision before, during, and after decisions were made. This reveals that the graduates carried reflection with them into their field.

Central office/district administrators. The district administrators, consistent with the campus administrators, represented the impact of reflectivity on their leadership and

cited it as a necessary practice for change to take place. One district administrator noted the importance of reflection before personal change takes place, stating, “We practiced reflection on a daily basis and...grew from that internal reflection.” Another administrator tied reflection to moral vision and the need for reflection as a guiding principle, stressing “that you need to always reflect back and think of those observations of that moral vision that leaders have to continue to communicate to everyone in workspace and use directly as your guide.” Responses within this category showed that graduates engaged in shared vision, communication, and collaboration and relationships as well. One superintendent emphasized, “Prior to my doctoral studies, I do not think I reflected on how my decisions would impact others from a social standpoint. Through my reflective practice, I attempt to make sure that all of my decisions take into account any marginalized group and I strive to ensure a democratic leadership style.” Overall, this group of graduates credited a specific course with honing this reflective skill. They also indicated that since the course, they have continued to engage in reflective thinking and practices.

Higher education. Reflection was also a heavily cited critical skill for graduates now in higher education. These graduates emphasized that reflection was a tenet used throughout the program but indicated, just as with change, that it was a skill solidified and honed in the program instead of initially learned. One indicated that she did not however, anticipate “how powerful reflection was” before the program. Another also indicated that the program “just solidified the significance of reflective practice in everyday life.” These graduates recognized the need for serious and authentic reflection taking place before significant change takes place.

The findings regarding reflection for graduates who are now in other fields apart from education were consistent with the findings of the rest of the graduates and indicated that reflection permeated the courses and resulted in positive changes for the graduates. These participants also indicated the same course’s significant impact on helping them learn and hone the critical skill of reflection as the graduates in district administration. One graduate shared how this skill changed her personally by stating,

I am a get-it-done person. I make my list and get it done, moving on to the next project. This is not always good because you need to spend time thinking about how you could have made this project better. The program taught me how to reflect.

One graduate connected reflection with criticality: “I continuously engaged in the activities of self-reflection and criticality, which are the purposes of scholarly inquiry.” Again, most graduates indicated the need for reflection before change could take place. Generally the changes requiring the most reflection were changes in the social justice arena.

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Criticality

Campus administrators. Criticality was noted in two prominent areas of the skill of looking at problems critically and learning to ask the “right questions” and the recognition of the critical issues of social justice. One principal noted that the program “had an impact in my practice of inquiry” and “made me more analytical of everything I did.” Another principal stated that one can “get caught up in doing things the way they have always been done” but that the program “sets you up to look at above and beyond rather than just the ‘this is the way it has always been done’ way.” Looking at a problem critically teaches students to look at a problem from every angle and to be aware of questions of social justice. One principal noted that the program taught her to look at every “decision that comes across my desk. I always have to remember to think of all the cultural issues” and “to make sure every student’s needs are going to be met with the decisions that are made.” This response reveals the connection between the ability to think critically about problems, analyzing the decision to be made in terms of isolating the possible situation by looking at “every angle” and critically analyzing the decision to consider issues of social justice.

Inherent in the skill of critical analysis is the obligation for ethical decision making. The graduates indicated that the result of criticality was an attention to social justice and ethics. As one principal noted, “The ethical decision making I found at SFA, the background of it, the awareness of it made me more aware of some challenges that some of my parents go through.” Though one respondent stated, “They can’t teach you how to be democratic, ethical, socially just, to want equality for everyone”; the program does teach and emphasize awareness to these issues by teaching critical analysis. Learning to ask the “right questions” is to learn to understand the issues and decisions at hand so as not to dismiss any affected parties through personal ignorance or inattention. This theme, which emerged from the interviews, indicates graduates not only understand the roles of social justice and equity but also that they put ethical decision-making into practice and provide role models for effective leadership in the field and indirectly foster future leadership by providing an example of ethical leadership.

Central office/district administrators. Central office personnel also noted that the program heightened their skills of analyzing problems to find the critical questions and issues. A superintendent noted that the program “caused me to slow down my thinking and get me out of the problem-solving mode all the time. I am to the point where I reflect and look at the problem from a variety of perspectives.” The criticality gained for central office personnel graduating from the doctoral program manifested in the ability to critically analyze problems, just as indicated by the campus administrators. Another superintendent noted that he has “developed a sense of analysis that takes information and tried to look at it in relation to experiences I have had or I have read about or that

I have researched and compare someone else's opinion," showing again that part of the criticality gained in the program is looking at a problem or a decision to be made from multiple perspectives.

Higher education. The graduates in higher education did not explicitly address criticality as the graduates in other fields did. This could reveal, again, a possible disjoint between theory and practice for the graduates in this field and could reveal a need for curriculum evaluation so that these graduates could carry this skill with them to the workplace.

Other educational leaders. Educational leaders in other professions tended to focus on the issue of social justice when addressing criticality rather than critical analysis as the campus and district administrators did. These leaders indicated criticality was an obligation as a leader: "We have this obligation to show others a different way by modeling social justice and democratic leadership." Many alumni indicated this was a learned obligation or a learned awareness. In addition, these alumni addressed the issue of silencing the voices of others as a learned awareness that they now demonstrate in practice. One teacher stated, "I am always told that I am liked as a teacher because students have a voice. I treat my students the same way we were treated in the doctoral program. Your participation in class shapes and forms what you are going to learn." These comments revealed that the design of the program and the course work does have an impact on the practice of graduates.

Impact as Scholar-Practitioner

Campus administrators. The emphasis on the role and importance of the scholar-practitioner in the doctoral program is evident in the responses from campus administrators. First, respondents indicated that the learning that took place was applied to practice — inherent to the ideal of the scholar-practitioner. One alumnus stated that all the activities and readings "conceptualized what was meant by scholar-practitioner." A campus principal noted that "everything we read, it seemed like we had to apply it to our practice." Another principal noted that the skills learned are still relevant in his job today. He stated, "I can pull things together and I can recognize the flaws or the weaknesses and strengths of a program now based on the theories that I learned." This statement indicated that it was much more than content that was gained in the doctoral program; it was rather an understanding of using content responsibly and effectively in practice. Another principal noted that her leadership was affected in a profound way by the skills acquired in the program: "They are so blended and interwoven that it is impossible to separate the strands from every leadership interaction or decision of which I'm a part." This response again emphasized the use of scholarship in practice.

Central office/district administrators. District administrators indicated the role of scholar-practitioner was a critical skill gained from the doctoral program. One superintendent

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noted, “The entire concept of scholar-practitioner has influenced my leadership style.” In addition, several superintendents noted that the program was especially strong in creating change agents — a true indicator of scholar-practitioners. Several respondents used the phrase “put the theory into practice” and indicated this was a skill learned in the program. One alumnus described the program as being “cutting edge” because of “the scholar-practitioner bar.” The level of expectation and action was indicated to be high.

Higher education and educational leaders. The role of scholar-practitioner was not explicitly indicated in the interviews with those in higher education or those classified as other educational leaders. This further solidified the disjoint between theory and practice within this category of employment.

Recommendations

Campus administrators. The campus administrators’ recommendations centered on the addition of advanced course work. The courses recommended included advanced quantitative statistical data, psychology, and an extended view of ethical and legal issues. The courses recommended by the campus administrators were courses that a campus administrator could put to use on daily basis and did not focus on theoretical concepts. This is antithetical to the design of the scholar-practitioner program and could indicate a call for a more traditionally designed program. However, the responses to the program on the whole showed that the scholar-practitioner design was valuable to practice. The recent demands of accountability, however, could be pushing administrators to hone skills pertinent to the standards and accountability movement but not necessarily pertinent to authentic change and leadership.

Central office/district administrators. Recommendations from alumni currently in central office or superintendent positions focused on the need for more course work in curriculum and instruction at the leadership level and courses in finance and budgeting. Again, the recommendations reflected the respondents’ current positions, just as the campus administrators’ recommendations did.

Higher education. While graduates of the doctoral educational leadership program recognized research, change, and reflection as prominent critical skills gained or honed in the program and overall contributed their success in higher education to these skills, they also identified areas of improvement in the program and gave recommendations. These graduates indicated a need for more research courses and more in-depth inquiry into both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Interestingly, only these graduates in higher education found this as a significant deficiency in the course, indicating that the deficiency was specific to the current position. These recommendations on the whole pose the question of whether a general program in educational leadership is more or less beneficial than programs designed to meet the specific needs of different fields within education.

Conclusions and Implications

Throughout this study, there were several findings that were similar between all of the groups that were studied and compared. Almost all graduates indicated that reflection not only resulted in positive changes for each of them personally, but reflection has also allowed each of them to become more aware of the perspectives of each stakeholder, to critically examine each and every situation that presents itself, and to become more reflective in their decision making as leaders.

Another area consistent across all of the groups studied was criticality. As with reflection, criticality allowed graduates to heighten their skills of problem analysis and to focus on democratic leadership and social justice when making decisions that affect others. The doctoral program taught these leaders that an awareness of and obligation to the promotion of criticality was of utmost importance.

Each of the graduates had consistent views about their transformation as a scholar-practitioner. Each emphasized that the role of scholar-practitioner was a critical skill that was gained and that this skill inherently influenced their leadership style. Many noted the essential balance between that of the scholar and that of the practitioner. Each was needed in order to make educated and democratic decisions in the workplace. Many students praised this approach as one that was essential to dealing with the problems faced in education today.

Even though the respondents who were categorized in the classification of higher education had a tendency to emphasize the same aspects of the program, their responses were not as concentrated in the various areas as those of the other groups. Their responses indicated that they saw a significant need for additional research courses, which was a direct reflection of their current position in higher education. Interestingly enough, they felt that writing and research were both equally important to these positions. Writing was a needed skill to communicate with the academic community; however, research was paramount to supporting this message.

The other area, besides research, where the groups differed slightly, was in writing. The campus administrators saw the research and writing component beneficial to their role as decision makers. They also saw this skill as a critical practice in their long-term planning and evaluation. Their view of writing and research was as a skill needed on a daily basis that had a direct impact on campus-level programs. This skill was critical because it allowed them to make reflective and research-based decisions rather than doing things the way they had always been done. The district-level administrators viewed writing and research skills as a means to not only promote themselves professionally but also their districts as well. They indicated that these skills were important in evaluating programs, obtaining funding, guiding decisions, and fostering change.

Where the category of change was addressed, each group tended to agree that there was often a personal change that each graduate experienced as a direct result of the doctoral program. Many of the respondents referred to the significant amount of

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courage that was gained because of the self-reflection and the readings experienced in the scholar-practitioner program. Several responded that their studies had provided them with new insight as to how their decisions affected others, and that they now had the courage to strive for a more moral vision for all. The only group that did not focus on the importance of personal change to this extent was higher education. This group viewed change from a much more institutional level rather than personal. Its emphasis was on changing theories rather than on individual transformation. This skill was more pronounced in this particular group than in any other.

While there was much agreement between the respondents who were studied, there were differences in recommendations for the program. The campus administrators centered their recommendations on the addition of advanced course work in research, psychology, ethics, and legal issues. The district-level or central office respondents indicated a need for more course work in curriculum and instruction and in finance and budgeting. Finally, similar to the campus-level group, the higher education graduates indicted a need for more research, especially a more in-depth study of both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Each of these recommendations for the program reflected the current position and needs of each group.

Some theorists argue that university educational leadership doctoral programs are inadequate in the joint role of preparing future educational leaders as scholars and as practitioners (Shulman, Golde, Bueschel, & Garabedian, 2006; Levine, 2005), however, a majority of the graduates felt strongly that the skills taught in this program were beneficial to their development as educational leaders. This study described the impact of an educational leadership doctoral program on professional practice. The key practices, processes, and results of this program have had a significant impact on these students' growth as scholar-practitioner leaders who will contribute to the effective improvement in our schools. This study indicated a need for future research to determine if scholar-practitioner educational leadership programs are meeting specific needs of the standards and accountability movement and if scholar-practitioner educational leadership programs should be more tailored to specific fields of educational interest.

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