BRIDGING THEORY TO PRACTICE WITH ACTION RESEARCH IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS

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Introduction

Levine's (2005) report, Educating School Leaders, is the first in a series from his four-year study of U.S. schools of education. Levine correctly notes that our "principals and superintendents no longer serve primarily as supervisors. They are being called on to lead in the redesign of their schools and school systems" (p. 12). He then uses this premise to launch a devastating critique of educational leadership programs.

Others have already rebutted Levine on multiple issues (Young et.al., 2005). We do not address all of Levine's (2005) criticisms of educational leadership programs, some of which we find compelling. The single topic that we examine here is a point on which we take issue with Levine, his blanket dismissal of Ed.D. programs' ability to fulfill a valuable research function.

Levine (2005) includes "research" among his nine categories for judging school leadership programs, emphasizing that the research conducted should be "of high quality, driven by practice, and useful to practitioners and/or policy makers" (p.13). Citing Bridges, Immegart, Murphy, and Vriesenga, and others, Levine criticizes the dissertations completed by students in such programs and the scholarly output generated by educational leadership faculty. He argues:

> Given their shortcomings and the condition of doctoral education in school leadership programs, there would seem to be little reason why either doctoral intensive or masters

> I education schools should offer a doctorate in educational administration. The institutions with the greatest capacity to offer quality doctoral programs in school leadership are research extensive education schools. (p. 48)

When it comes to describing the type of research that he would like to see educational leadership students and faculty conducting, Levine highlights the "actionable research" performed in Britain's National College for School Leadership; which is a credit-free, performance-oriented, adult-education institute, rather than a degree granting program. Levine explains:

> Its research reports, intended for consumption and immediate application by practitioners, are brief, geared to administrator needs, and available on-line. The college prides itself on doing "real-time research" that is produced diligently but quickly. (p. 56)

Contrary to Levine, we believe that such research is exceptionally well suited for Ed.D. programs; that, indeed, this type of action research naturally aligns with the original intent of the Ed.D. as an advanced degree for practitioners. To illustrate our point we will discuss the evolution of action research in two areas within our own Ed.D. program at the University of Hartford, the field-based, administrative internship and the doctoral dissertation.

Action Research Defined

Action research is used primarily a tool for improving teachers' classroom practice (Ferrance, 2000). Sagor (2000) defined action research as "…a disciplined process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking the action. The primary reason for engaging in action research is to assist the 'actor' in improving and/or refining his or her actions." (p. 3, emphasis in original). Glanz (2003) noted that many educators view leaders' roles in action research as facilitators of teachers' work. However, he suggested that educational leaders "can and should become involved in action research for their own professional development" (p. 17). This notion of action research as leadership development is an appropriate response to Levine's (2005) premise that the complexities

of school leadership in the current social context require research that is practical and immediately applicable to practitioners.

The current climate of schools and districts to meet accountability mandates has moved many toward a data-based decision making process, using standardized test scores mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Action research is one method for educational leaders to develop a process for examining practice in schools, using additional data sources to foster the improvement of student achievement. Sufficient rigor in the action research process is critical to its viability as a means for school improvement and lasting change (Stringer, 2004). If leaders are expected to use data to make decisions, attention to action research in administrator preparation programs is important to building the capacity of leaders as full participants in the action research process.

The action research process, conceived by both Lewin and Corey, is “conducted in a group and the emphasis [is] on the recursive nature of the action research process where researchers need to allow their initial understandings of a problem to shift to remain relevant to changing situations” (as cited in Zeichner, 2001, p. 274). Senge and Scharmer (2001) characterized this type collaborative action research as an inter-organizational learning infrastructure “by linking people from different organizations to help, coach and support each other” (p. 243). Aspiring educational leaders embarking on a field experience leading to certification are able to form such a collaborative research group when looking at issues of practice at school and district levels. Collaborative action research guides the structure of the administrative internship at the University of Hartford.

Action Research within an Administrative Internship

Careful attention has been paid to the rigor and structure of the administrative internship experience at the University of Hartford. The framework for the field experience is grounded in twelve state standards, which have been collapsed into four areas for school improvement planning: (1) Teaching and Learning, (2) Capacity Building, (3) Community Building, and (4) Policy and

Management (Connecticut State Board of Education [CSBOE], 1999; Connecticut State Department of Education [CSDE], personal communication, 2003). Interns meet together in seminar sessions using action research as a method to refine their personal practice.

The complexities of school and district level leadership in an age of accountability necessitate that interns experience the work over time in a field-based setting. In order to ensure these experiences are of the highest quality, they must include opportunities for interns to reflect on their observations and projects; be of sufficient rigor; grounded in state and national standards; and give ample time for students to complete long-range meaningful projects (Capasso & Daresh, 2001; Fry, Bottoms, & O'Neill, 2005). The use of action research to accomplish these goals infuses systematic inquiry into practice by aspiring leaders, and is consistent with Levine's (2005) call for practical application of research as a bridge between theory and practice.

Applying Action Research to the Internship Experience

The structure of the internship activities is project-based, since a full day placement in the primary district is rare due to the interns' need to continue in their current positions. Using Ferrance's (2000) six-step action research cycle, interns engage in the processes of: (1) identifying a focus for their internship projects, (2) collecting data, (3) analyzing and interpreting the data, (4) taking action on the evidence, (5) evaluating the results, and (6) identifying next steps.

Interns begin this process by completing an adapted version of the *Educational Leader Self Inventory* (CSBOE, 2001), designed to assist leaders in assessing their strengths and weaknesses across the CSDE standards. Interns use their personal results to identify where they should prioritize their projects. Once focus areas are identified with their clinical and university supervisors, they collect data from a variety of sources and keep a reflective journal of their actions and observations, which form the basis of the personal and group action research. Our interns' projects have led them to assist their schools and districts with a variety of issues: taking leadership roles in accreditation processes,

conducting policy manual reviews for a board of education vote, developing and directing summer school programming for special needs students, implementing faculty professional development at the school and district levels, and leading curriculum development projects.

Action Research at the Clinical Site

Using action research in their individual projects, interns define focus questions, gather data, propose plans, and begin the implementation process. For example, an aspiring principal chose to focus on a project designed to increase the amount of time teachers spend with their elementary school students in response to accountability for instruction, addressing a perceived lack of time that regular education teachers had to teach their full classes. Teachers in her school complained of students being taken out of class for extra academic help; art, music, and physical education classes; instrumental music lessons; and other interruptions. This intern gathered data from two sources: a sample weekly schedule and completion of a survey regarding time for instruction with all students in the classroom and the details about numbers of students out of the classroom and the frequency of these disruptions.

The intern chaired a committee that analyzed the data and confirmed the overall perceptions of the problem. Acting on the evidence, the committee suggested several options for restructuring the school's master schedule, which were then submitted to the principal and full faculty. After further negotiating with the principal and district level leaders, an adapted version of a proposed schedule was adopted and implemented. Through this experience and others like it, interns learn the value of gathering data from multiple sources to ensure that perceived issues are grounded in fact. Armed with evidence, the interns learn that change plans are more readily considered by both stakeholders and decision makers.

Action Research in the Internship Seminar

Action research is also used in our seminar sessions to engage interns in reflection regarding their leadership skills, beginning with a journaling process. Interns are expected to keep reflec-

tive journals chronicling their experiences and logging their individual reflections as a part of their data collection. An electronic journal summary is required weekly through an online course support system, where they receive feedback directly from the university supervisor. They are also required to collect documents to be included in a final portfolio, which the university supervisor reviews with the interns during individual meetings between seminar sessions. These individual interactions allow the university supervisor to systematically organize the seminar sessions where interns share their experiences, reflections, observations, and other data they are collecting; and seek out further input from their colleagues.

During the collaborative process, issues relating to leadership skills and the change process are the most frequently discussed, rather than the actual projects. Often our interns struggle with others who are resistant to change and their roles as change agents. They share their experiences and observations of leaders who facilitate change well, and brainstorm strategies for addressing the change process. Subsequent seminars allow them to follow up on their attempts to work through the change process and what they have learned about leadership.

The seminars provide a structured environment where interns share data and work together to make decisions about how to proceed with the various projects in which they are engaged. Follow-up sessions are designed to help interns share the actions they have taken as a result of the evidence they have collected and analyzed, the results of those actions, and brainstorming next steps.

The Professional Portfolio

The culminating activity of the internship is the development of a professional portfolio prepared by the interns, which brings them back full circle in the action research cycle. The portfolio allows them to reflect upon themselves as professionals and upon their experiences in the internship. The portfolios are formally presented at a Portfolio Showcase to their clinical supervisors, educational leadership faculty members, and colleagues.

This development of a portfolio and its presentation pro-

vide an opportunity for our interns to report the results of what they have learned through their practice and their use of action research to shape it. The feedback they receive at the Portfolio Showcase gives them the opportunity to further reflect on their emerging leadership skills. Student course evaluations indicate that they have found a great deal of value in the action research component and expressed that they gained new understandings about leadership and how theory links to practice in ways that they were not able to do during their other coursework. This experience, which is a capstone of the doctoral coursework, is a preparation for the use of action research as a means of completing the dissertation.

Action Research as a Doctoral Dissertation

Over its fourteen-year existence, our Ed.D. program has evolved to include action research dissertations. Initially, we prevented dissertations from being completed within one's own school district in order to limit researcher bias. Consequently, our students generated many state-wide and regional surveys. Although of some interest to our state's administrators, such studies provided the students conducting them with little help in initiating change within their own schools. Increasingly, we realized that the questionnaire and interview design skills our students were learning, alone, would not serve them especially well in their administrative careers. Thus, we expanded the purview of our students' dissertations to include action research studies within their own districts and even their own schools. We reasoned that effective action research involves the use of skills necessary for program evaluation, an important competence area for capable administrators.

This section contains brief descriptions of three studies currently in progress, which we believe demonstrate the focused rigor and practical utility possible in action research dissertations. As our Ed.D. program serves students working in both K-12 and postsecondary settings, we selected examples covering a broad range of options Compelling justification for all three of these studies was provided by extensive reviews of the literature. Furthermore, each study is likely to yield important data for ongoing program development within their schools of origin.

A Study of K-2 Homework

One of our students (Toper, 2005) is conducting a study in a small, rural school district that has been struggling with the issue of whether or not K-2nd grade teachers should be assigning children homework. Cooper's (as cited in Toper) meta-analysis and other studies (Wahlberg et al.; Polloway et al. as cited in Toper) reported that the benefits of homework at the elementary level are negligible. Furthermore, Kralovec and Buell (as cited in Toper) in their book, The End of Homework, argue convincingly about the many negative effects on children and their families. However, under the pressures exhibited by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, some families and upper-level teachers in this district are hoping that early elementary school homework will establish the work habits in children necessary for them to perform better in later grades, as reflected in the state-wide Connecticut Mastery Test, which is first administered in 4th grade.

While district decision makers are wrestling with these findings and ideas, Toper is using intensive interviews to find out, in painstaking detail, what the district's K-2 teachers are actually doing regarding assigning homework and why they have adopted their particular approaches. Furthermore, she is exploring the roles that parents are playing in soliciting and completing of homework assignments and the relationship of teachers' assignments to the district's benchmark assessments. She is also asking teachers to craft what they consider to be an ideal district policy.

Neither Toper's district, nor any researcher, had ever reported data on these phenomena. Thus, she is adding important new information to the district's policy formulations, while also making a noteworthy contribution to the literature, perhaps assisting administrators and board members in other districts in designing their own action research projects.

A Study Examining the Impact of an Anti-Bullying Program

Recently, the literature has exploded with articles about the prevalence and consequences of bullying in our schools. However, there have been few attempts to design high quality studies examining the impact of anti-bullying programs. Another of our students

(Salvatore, 2005) is doing so in an intermediate school sufficiently large to allow a quasi-experimental action research study using homerooms as the unit of analysis. In addition to studying the impact on traditional face-to-face bullying, he is also examining the reported effects of cyber bullying.

The school that Salvatore is studying conducted an exploratory study of school climate in May 2004. It revealed levels of antisocial behavior indicative of bullying in line with those appearing throughout the literature. Furthermore, the district is anxious to examine the impact of an anti-bullying program which involves teaching students multiple strategies for defusing or avoiding bullying situations.

Immediately prior to and several weeks after the instruction, the participating students (approximately 23 per homeroom) from 12 homerooms (6 treatment and 6 control) will be assessed regarding the prevalence of bullying situations witnessed (including cyber bullying), their perceptions regarding the impact of the anti-bullying strategies on the number of bullying situations, their knowledge of social skills and their self-efficacy. Also, teachers throughout the school will be surveyed, pre and post treatment, regarding their perceptions of school climate.

Locally, Salvatore will provide an important follow-up to the district baseline study conducted in 2004. He will add to the slim literature regarding the impact of particular anti-bullying strategies, while expanding the research into the important area of cyber-bulling.

A Study of Early-entrant, Home-schooled Students within a Community College

The third of our students is a community college employee. She is conducting the first in-depth case study investigating the impact of attending community college on young, adolescent home schoolers (Lavoie, 2005). The admission and performance of young students into post-secondary schools has been chronicled for years (Brody et al.; Muratori as cited in Lavoie), but the recent phenomenon of young, home-schooled adolescents entering community college as part of their home-based instructional programs

has gone unreported in spite of difficult issues associated with such placements; including physical safety, privacy threats, objections by some faculty and potential for sexual harassment.

Lavoie's study involves intensive interviews with six students from ages 10 -16. She is also interviewing these students' parents, their community college instructors and school admissions officers. The focus of these interviews is on students' academic and social performance. She is also gathering data on interviewees' perceptions of institutional factors that might promote or inhibit student development. Finally, she is reviewing student grades to further assess performance and examining published institutional policies to judge their appropriateness for younger students.

This is another study addressing an important gap in the literature, while providing valuable insights to school leaders. Lavoie is helping this community college to take the first systematic look at how to serve a new, unusual, and growing student population.

Conclusion

These examples of action research in the administrative internship experience and the doctoral dissertation address one of the goals articulated by Noffke (as cited by Zeichner, 2001) in the work of public school educators "to produce knowledge that will be useful to others, either in the same setting or other settings." (p. 276). The key to the viability of action research in Ed.D. programs lies in the attention to rigor on the part of both faculty and students. Corey (as cited by Zeichner, 2001) was among the first to articulate a set of phases to be followed in the action research process. The model articulated by Ferrance (2000), which is used in the University of Hartford's internship experience, noted above, is a variation of that process. Many others have also presented models that may be followed to assure that the inquiry is systematic and the resulting data are valid (Glanz, 2003; Sagor, 2000; Stringer, 2004).

Stringer (2004) also addressed the issue of what action researchers need to do to ensure that their work is valid. Citing the work of Lincoln and Guba, Stringer noted that action researchers must design studies that are credible (plausibility and integrity of a study), transferable (applicability of results to other contexts), de-

pendable (research processes clearly defined and open to scrutiny), and confirmable (study outcomes are directly drawn from the data presented). He further articulated steps within each of these criteria that action researchers must take to ensure that their work is trustworthy and rigorous.

Levine (2005) reached the "inescapable conclusion" that:

> research in educational administration is not perceived as valuable by practitioners or policy makers. It is criticized by the academic community and by education school fac ulty members and deans to a greater degree than research in any other field examined n the course of this study. (p.46)

Such criticism is hard to accept; and it may, in fact, be overstated. However, those of us involved in Educational Leadership programs always will have an obligation to engage in and publicly showcase rigorous, practically useful research projects. We believe that well conceived and implemented action research studies are a preferred approach for fulfilling this responsibility.

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