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The Jointing of Theory and Practice: Scholars and Practitioners Find Common Ground

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ABSTRACT

The positive outcomes of the collaborative efforts of full-time and adjunct faculty in assessing the content and rigor of the doctoral program in School Leadership reinforce the value of blending scholar and practitioner expertise. Developing the capacity of full-time and adjunct faculty to be co-facilitators of program change resulted in the transformation of a disjointed program into a jointed, well-grounded program based on the co-equal foundation of scholarship and practice.

Introduction

Scholars and practitioners. Theory and practice. Much has been written about these seemingly opposing concepts and their relation to the development of leaders who influence change – in this case, educational change. When scholars and practitioners work to achieve a common goal, in the spirit of collaboration based on professional trust and respect, the result is transformational change. This process of collaborative change is enhanced by the individual's readiness for change, the organization's readiness for change, and the social aspect of professional learning.

The word theory is derived from the Greek *theoria*, meaning to view or look at and can be considered as an effort by scholars to explain phenomena. A theory is an abstract, based on speculation or thought and can be considered passive. In contrast, practice is active, meaning 'to do'. A practitioner is one who does. Derived from the Greek *praxis*, it is concrete, implying an action. The integration of these two concepts can result in the co-creation of new knowledge and insight. The collaboration between the scholar and practitioner is enhanced when each understands the other's perspective and can embrace the process of change.

The doctoral program in School Leadership at East Tennessee State University (ETSU) prepares individuals for school, district, and state level leadership positions. We serve students from east Tennessee, western North Carolina, and southwest Virginia. Most of our graduates hold school leadership positions in the region and maintain a strong connection with the University. Although these students have scholarly, advanced degrees, most view themselves as practitioners. The faculty has the task of bridging the gap between practice and theory, while being cognizant that students will return to practice upon completion of their doctoral degree.

One dilemma for university programs is striking the balance between academic knowledge and practical experience. Murphy (2001) stated that placing academic knowledge at the center of programs is self-defeating because no matter how the knowledge is presented, there is still the dilemma of how to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Daresh (2002) noted the limitations and benefits of both academic knowledge and experience. He argued that academic

knowledge provides a common language and conceptual framework for aspiring leaders, but that it is only part of what leaders need to know. He further argues that field-based knowledge has practical value, but it is experience based on existing practice instead of needed reforms. Therefore, it seems to reason, that scholarship should be informed by practical experience, and, in turn, practical experience must be informed by scholarship. The challenge becomes one of discovering and developing experiences beyond the realm of current practice. This must occur in a climate of safety in risk-taking (Fullan, 2008).

An ongoing criticism from superintendents, practicing principals, and researchers is the gap between theory and practice. Murphy (1992) stated that optimal leadership development occurs in the context of ongoing field work rather than the formal classroom setting. Critics cite the lack of depth of opportunities for students to practice their leadership skills in meaningful situations. Practitioners can assist scholars in developing those opportunities.

The School Leadership program at ETSU has traditionally been regarded as a scholar-practitioner program. However, until recently, the practitioner focus has been secondary resulting in a disjointed program. Several factors have influenced the necessity of a more balanced philosophical and practical foundation to the program. A change in program leadership, increased student enrollment, increased adjunct support, student and district expectations, and higher education accountability standards are but a few of the factors influencing the need for collaborative change.

A primary impetus for the change, however, has been the tension full-time faculty and adjuncts themselves have experienced between their own scholarly and practitioner backgrounds. A recurring question has been that of balancing the two perspectives in the development of school leaders. A participative program evaluation conducted in 2009 revealing a disjointed curriculum emphasized the disconnect between the theory and practice. A foundation of trust and collaboration between full-time faculty and adjuncts was already established through on-going professional development opportunities within the department. As a result, full-time faculty and adjuncts felt mutually responsible for program change.

Collaboration

Collaboration is a democratic and inclusive endeavor based on pre-established interests. Generally, it goes beyond a level of cooperation: There is a sense of intellectual commitment and belonging. Dufour, Dufour, Eaker and Many (2006) define collaboration as a systematic process of working together interdependently to impact professional practice and improve collective results. This working together in a synergistic manner requires that individuals bring diverse skills and knowledge to the effort. The collaborative effort was enhanced by (a) the readiness of each individual stakeholder for change, (b) the readiness of the organization for change, and (c) the social aspect of change.

Facilitating the collaborative effort between full-time and adjunct faculty were the trusting relationships and sense of belonging that had already been established. All adjunct faculty are graduates of the ETSU doctoral program in Leadership and are in leadership positions as principals, teachers, supervisors, directors of programs, or superintendents of districts. Familiar with the scholarly aspects of the doctoral program, they also had the practical experiences necessary to be successful in leadership positions. Full-time faculty also have background

experiences as school leaders in a variety of leadership positions. These common experiences established credibility and trust in the process of change that needed to occur. Odden and Wolstetter (1995) found that a shared knowledge base is essential for the development of a professional learning community. The continued development of the community of learners is critical to the success of the changes. The faculty must continue to learn to learn in order to solve problems.

Change

The genesis of the dialogue between full-time and adjunct faculty was the analysis of the results of the 2009 participative program evaluation. This dialogue centered around four basic questions. (1) Does the doctoral program have sufficient rigor? (2) Does the doctoral program have curricula that is aligned, delivered, and assessed? (3) Are there standards of quality inherent in the doctoral program? (4) How are the needs of the scholar and the practitioner balanced?

This dialogue resulted in the identification of three cornerstones of the doctoral program. The first is the emphasis on the development of the skills of leadership. These skills are the underlying component of all scholarly work and practical experiences. The second is the emphasis on increasing knowledge and understanding of the process of change. Because change is ongoing and inevitable, students must be able to understand, adapt, and lead positive change. The third emphasis of the doctoral program is the idea of global thinking – the ability to see and understand the big picture of schooling, change, and the world.

After these three cornerstones were identified, the hard work of collaboration began. An analysis of syllabi determined whether the cornerstones were the basis of all scholarly and practical experiences. There is on-going analysis of the objectives and topics for each course, textbooks, supplemental materials, learning strategies, benchmark writing, relevant field experiences, and desired outcomes for student learning.

The lack of opportunities in the university classroom to experience the real world of school leadership created a challenge for the faculty to explore opportunities for students to practice newly acquired leadership skills. Therefore, the linkages between the scholarly research requirements of each course in the program were aligned with the practical experiences students would participate in through their internship and residency requirements. Each experience was analyzed for its relevance in relation to the connection with course and program objectives and goals. Moreover, the same standards applied to scholarly assignments. Every effort was made to ensure that each assignment had practical relevance for the development of leadership capabilities of students. Because adjuncts possessed the practitioner's insight, experiences were highly relevant to scholarly requirements and the aspects of the real world of school leadership. Under these conditions, aspiring school leaders are provided the opportunities to develop their individualistic capacity for transferring the knowledge learned in the classroom to the practical experiences of the leadership environment.

Transformational Change

The balance between the interests of a scholarly focus and a practical focus in the School Leadership program occurred during the process of transformational program change. This change was facilitated by the collaboration of full-time and adjunct faculty who recognized the

importance of both experiences. Anderson and Ackeman-Anderson (2001) explain that transformation is a thinking approach to change, not a process. Three core concepts assist in understanding this approach. First, *change* itself is external and may be a temporary state. It is the result of an event or intervention. Second, *transition* refers to the mental state of stakeholders. It refers to the ability of stakeholders to put aside former ways of doing things and embracing and adapt to the new (Verwey & Du Plooy-Cilliers, 2003). Third, *transformational change* requires a paradigm shift within the individual stakeholder and the group itself (Cummings & Worley, 2001). Transformational change is only possible through transition of behavior based on internalization of changes by stakeholders (Gouillart & Kelly, 1995). Jick and Peiperl (2003) refer to transformation as organizational reorientation. The complexity of the change process, coupled with the social intricacy of a collaborative group, leads to the conclusion that the process of change into transformational change is a culture building and culture changing process. This transformational change occurs when the group utilizes all the human resources and aligns the structural processes with the cultural processes.

High-involvement Management

The conditions necessary for creating an organization that has the capability to transform itself into a new organizational culture are identified in the high-involvement management framework (Wohlstetter & Mohrman, 1994). The foundation of the high-involvement management framework is that the empowerment of stakeholders is enhanced when there is an emphasis on increasing (a) power, (b) knowledge and skills, (c) information, and (d) rewards (Lawler, 1986).

High-involvement management is appropriate for organizations that engage in knowledge production, exist in a changing environment, have complex job tasks requiring constant decision-making, and are characterized by interdependence among tasks within organizations (Wohlstetter & Odden, 1992). All these tasks apply to the doctoral program in School Leadership. The factors identified in the framework are facilitators of change and can be identified in this collaborative process.

Power

Lawler (1986) indicated that an organization's performance improves when power shifts to stakeholders in the organization. Power was shared among the full-time faculty and the adjunct faculty through the mechanism of collaboration. This is not a simple transfer of power to stakeholders: It is a change in the structure of the organization. As more knowledge was acquired through dialogue, program evaluation, and analysis of syllabi individuals were able to contribute to the change process. The faculty were provided the opportunity to inform, influence, and facilitates change based on their professional knowledge and collaborative decision-making.

Knowledge and Skills

Knowledge and skills are essential for the enhancement of stakeholder collaboration. Three areas of skill became apparent in the collaborative process: (1) the skills necessary to work together effectively in a team setting, (2) the technical skills necessary to foster change, and (3) the skill which enables stakeholders to engage in multiple tasks. The decentralization of knowledge facilitates patterns of involvement oriented toward improved performance (Lawler, 1986). One

form of knowledge and skills is technical. On-going professional development opportunities for full-time and adjunct faculty that focus on research based best practices in teaching, learning styles, integration of technology, and assessments are examples of technical knowledge. Professional development occurred in face-to-face meetings with an on-line support component facilitated by individuals with relevant expertise practice. Informal methods such as sharing articles, research, and anecdotal experiences added to the knowledge base. In addition, knowledge relevant to management procedures within the organization and the interpersonal skills required for collaboration were important. Knowledge and skills were enhanced by interaction among faculty and reflective practice.

Information

Information about program goals, objectives, performance, and decision-making parameters are basic in order for stakeholders to make quality decisions that foster transformational change. Individuals shared information using a variety of communication mechanisms, i.e. e-mail, memos, telephone, and twitter. In addition to the use of formal documents, there was primary reliance on human interaction. Full-time faculty and adjunct faculty receive the same information relevant to program improvement. The sharing of information enhanced the collaborative nature of the on-going work.

Rewards

Intrinsic rewards were present during this process. Stakeholders felt a sense of belonging and professionalism as evidenced by participation in the time-consuming process. This strengthened the sense of purpose.

Conclusion

The collaboration between full-time and adjunct faculty in the effort provide a balance between the scholar and practitioner continues. Change is not an event: It is a process (Fullan, 2008). Research has shown that it takes three to five years to implement meaningful change (Gersten, Carnine, Zoref, & Cronin, 1986; George, Hall, & Uchiyama, 2000). Grundy (1998) and Jick and Pieperl (2003) define organizational change as a complex process because the collective reaction to change is unpredictable. As change is not always observable the benefits cannot be assessed quickly. The factors of power, knowledge and skills, information, and rewards facilitate the process of organizational change (Lawler, 1986) and will continue to be used to evaluate the process of program change. The interrelationship of the factors inherent in the high-involvement management model and the organization of the collaborative team are dynamic and continually changing; however, the mechanisms reflected in the high-involvement management framework allow stakeholders to deal with the technical, social, and political forces which impact change. The transformational changes in the program occurred because of (a) individuals' readiness for change, (b) organizational readiness for change, and (c) the social aspect of professional learning.

The full-time and adjunct faculty were receptive to the idea of change when they determined that the balance between theory and practice would benefit students. Their sense of professionalism, enhanced by their own knowledge and skills, led to a confidence that facilitated the transformational change process. The School Leadership program itself was ready for change.

The self-governance of the collaborative group was instrumental in the change process. The participants in the program were able to balance the needs of the School Leadership program with their own belief systems. Empowerment was based on the consensual framework of values, goals, and priorities of the participants and developed as the collaborative team emerged. The full-time and adjunct faculty had a shared mission and were action oriented with the goal of continuous program improvement. The commitment to the balance between theory and practice was the foundation of each decision. The sharing of power and the atmosphere of safety in risk-taking has contributed to dialogue and collaboration.

There have been three distinct phases of development in the transformational change process. The first phase was the *commitment* stage. Stakeholders made a personal and group commitment to changing the School Leadership program. During this stage stakeholders set personal goals and began developing relationships. The second phase was the *implementation* stage consisting of forming the collaborative team, setting goals, and building trust. The last stage is the current stage – the *refinement* stage. This is the stage wherein the changes become truly sustainable as the organization operationalizes the structural and cultural aspects of the transformational change. The new culture is characterized by transparency and continual learning.

This process demonstrates the positive effects of collaboration between the scholar and practitioner in program improvement. Fullan (1996) stated that the organic, inherent nature of change is that it is non-linear. Technical, social, and political forces influence the change process. However, the full-time faculty and adjunct faculty had established a strong professional relationship prior to the change process and this provided the autonomy to deal with the forces that were barriers to change. To continue with positive change, the faculty will continue to strengthen collaborative efforts. It is expected that individual readiness for change, organization readiness for change, and the development of the collaborative team will facilitate the refinement of program improvement and influence change. The bridge between theory and practice, in this case, is the collaborative team consisting of full-time and adjunct faculty who worked together for change in the School Leadership program. The efforts of this team reveal the potential for bridging the gap between theory and practice – of transforming a disjointed doctoral program into a jointed doctoral program.

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