

Academic Leadership: The Online Journal

Volume 8
Issue 4 Fall 2010

Article 66

1-1-2010

The Garage of the Ivory Tower: The Importance of the 21st Century Education Doctorate

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Recommended Citation

Barnett, Joshua and Carlson, David (2010) "The Garage of the Ivory Tower: The Importance of the 21st Century Education Doctorate," *Academic Leadership: The Online Journal*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 4 , Article 66.
Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj/vol8/iss4/66>

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Academic Leadership Journal

Making decisions about how to prepare students and teachers for the 21st century is a complex endeavor, and preparing the leaders of America's schools – those responsible for leading the some 15,000 school districts, three million public education teachers, and 50 million public education students – is perhaps most complex of all. Educational administrators, like teachers, juggle competing interests and negotiate with multiple stakeholders simultaneously. Generating sustained school change often necessitates implementing policies that are rarely able to account for the varied and potentially competing issues that are situated locally. Therefore, preparing school leaders means providing them with the necessary tools to evaluate the impact of national and state policies as well as plan strategically about how to improve conditions at their schools locally.

Graduate programs in educational leadership, including the oft-lamented educational doctorate, or Ed.D, across the nation are working to respond to these demands and prepare capable, competent, and confident leaders to address these challenges. Although recent concerns about the purpose of the doctorate in education have been contentious (e.g. Shulman, 2007), with some requesting these programs be purged entirely from the proverbial Ivory Tower of higher education (e.g. Levine, 2005), we explore with this paper how an innovative Ed.D. program can provide school leaders with missing, yet necessary tools to make their settings better, and, ultimately, improve opportunities for and the achievement of students. Glibly, if the Ed.D.'s presence in the garage of the Ivory Tower is a nuisance to some; then we advocate that being housed in the garage fits perfectly with the ambitious goals of every such program – since it is in that garage where the rubber, in fact, meets the road.

In addition, we describe how traditional ways of learning theoretical frameworks and concepts of research methods need to be altered to illustrate a synergistic relationship between theory and practice – one constructed for practitioners by and with practitioners. Notwithstanding these points, we posit no generalizable claims about doctoral education, or about educational leadership, per se. Instead, we offer how novel approaches to teaching and preparing school leaders for school change can have unanticipated, but beneficial affects. That is, in the design to provide Ed.D. students with an innovative and practical program of study, where their needs are met, we, as professors in such doctoral programs must learn that modeling leadership and innovation in our classrooms yield an opportunity to link disparate content and build curricular connections for our students, connections that transcend information in a textbook and apply directly to the challenges they observe in their own schools. We contend that such connections and opportunities are important for educational leaders to consider, to access, and to provide for prospective Ed.D candidates, who will continue to be the frontline leaders in America's schools.

What's in a Name? The Ed.D and Ph.D.

Many scholars, often Ph.D.s themselves, question the value-added from a doctorate in education that focuses on practice, or if it is simply a watered-down, perhaps even, easier path to the doctor designation. Such scholars contend that if a doctoral candidate is unable to complete successfully a traditional Ph.D. curriculum which focuses on producing original research and studying the historical

and philosophical trends in the social sciences, do they deserve to be considered experts in the field. This debate continues among academics (e.g. Ball & Forzani, 2007; Evans, 2007; Golde, 2007; Shulman, 2007); however, as this conversation unveils the professional opinion about Ed.D. programs generally, select universities are revamping their respective programs to fit the needs of their students. For example, Olson and Clark (2009) advanced the position for Leader-Scholar Communities (LSC), programs where students spend less time in traditional classroom environments and more time solving problems within their local schools. In the LSC program, professors venture out into their students' schools as well to see their work in progress. Yes, the professors go back to schoolhouses and observe and learn from those currently working in the schools rather than students showing up at a university for a weekly lecture.

The implementation of the LSC at [university withheld] Ed.D program provides opportunities to work closely with faculty members and other doctoral students. Based on a survey from Olson and Clark (2009), professors and students reported focusing on how to measure and understand the local impact of their decisions and how to solve real-world problems in their local contexts. Olson and Clark remind us that research and theory can be mediated through the lens of participant-researcher in his/her local context in all of its complexities, also known as the "real world." With the focus on the impact and application, the Leader-Scholar Communities design alters the teacher-student relationship in doctoral education. Instead of mandating a standardized set of books, readings, and practices where instructors share their knowledge with whomever is sitting in front of them, the LSC assumes and appreciates the student's experiences and expertise of their local settings. As students broaden their understanding of how and why problems persist in education, and the limitations of what can be done to address the various problems in their schools, students receive an opportunity to see the links between theory and practice.

Practical Experiences in Co-constructing Understandings and Applications

In the fall 2009, the fourth cohort of students began their education in the Leader-Scholar Communities model. Their first set of courses – two classes offered simultaneously by two instructors who co-teach and utilize the information from both classes to create a near seamless reality for the students. Unlike traditional programs which offer these two courses (research methods and theory), the students in this Ed.D. cohort essentially take a single extended class which combines theory and methods. The purpose of the course is to introduce students to various research methods as they relate to Action Research studies and provide them with a variety of theoretical frameworks to help them acquire different perspectives on their local situations. In general, this course combines the ubiquitous "introduction to theory" and "research methods" courses found spanning the gamut of doctoral programs.

Furthermore, it was designed to help students begin to reconsider the various forces that impact their local settings, design and develop data collection instruments, and synthesize theoretical models and methodological protocols to better determine how local difference is made and better understand the barriers to school change. The course was also designed to build a synergy between what is taught in the classroom and what occurs in the field. As their first course, students find a safe place to take risks and make mistakes as they apply research methods to their local settings.

The learning theory of this course was constructivism. As professors, we continually negotiate among

the needs of the students' dynamic, fluid local contexts, aims of the course, the competing views of the aims of doctoral education, and the student's understanding of course materials. Students receive a list of books to read throughout the semester. Texts include: Apple (2003), Cuban (2003), Foucault (1977), Freire (1979), and Noddings (1997). Students are guided to other readings by colleagues, professors, on-line discussion boards, and in their own examination of the literature on their selected topics. In addition, these texts are not standard for the program or for the course. Different texts have been used in previous semesters. As students explore and discuss the readings as a class, in groups, and in pairs both online and in-person, a shared understanding of the theories emerges. This phenomenon is the likely goal of any professor or teacher in any classroom across the globe; however, a unique feature of the team-teaching and seamless theory to practice model of this LSC Ed.D. program is the impact on both the students and the faculty.

Shifting from “the Sage on the Stage to the Guide on the Side”

A major hurdle that we, as professors of this course in this program, had to overcome was our personal biases about doctoral education. Both of us attended traditional graduate programs and thus had strong ideas about how doctoral students should be prepared to be practitioners and school leaders. Although we understood that many of our students would remain at their schools and not move into a university setting as researchers and/or professors, we had a difficult time mediating between our experiences as doctoral students and how to support community leaders to improve their local situations. Both of us enrolled in educational theory courses and took several research methods courses as doctoral students; so bridging these two seemingly disparate topics was a challenge for us, and, we suspect, part of the reason some professors often relegate the Ed.D. to the garage of the Ivory Tower. However, our own reflections indicated that the program wasn't for us and teaching isn't an opportunity to illustrate how much we know – rather the purpose of such courses and programs are for the practitioners – what do they need, why do they need it, how can we best facilitate those needs.

The initial four weeks of the semester was split into two sessions for theory and two sessions for research methods. During the theory sessions, we discussed one of the readings and its implications for education. Week five, the final week of in-class time before the students have five weeks to work in small groups with one of four professors, presented a challenge because we were to discuss Apple's (2003) book, provide the students with their final methods session, and ensure that students were ready to complete the data collection for their first Action Research cycle. The first part of the session discussed Apple's book, specifically on his distinctions between hegemony, ideology, and schooling. In addition, we realized a connection between hegemony and regression.

For Apple, hegemony relates to subtle and insidious means that individuals and groups maintain dominance over others without having to use overt force (i.e. violence). Hegemony “saturates” our everyday lives by dictating the sayable, knowable, and doable, or the common-sense practices of daily life. Ideology, in general, is a set of ideas or thoughts that compose a world view of individuals and groups. Apple argues that schools are not neutral institutions, but are infiltrated by social and economic inequalities that reproduce dominant modes of thinking and acting in the world. As we led an animated and engaged conversation about the impact of the hegemonic structure operating in any society, a serendipitous event emerged – an opportunity to explain and apply regression analysis to the educational theory literature.

The general linear regression model is expressed as:

While beginning with this information on a slide or writing it on the board would likely elicit the pained expressions any teacher hopes to avoid in sharing new, knowingly complicated material to students, the LSC students in our class on this night were led down a regression-lined primrose path with a conversational shift from hegemony to predicting behavior. In short, this conversation stemmed from how the hegemonic structure being discussed previously creates social standards, which perpetuate consistent patterns of behavior. Therefore, if we can predict a person's behavior then we can start to consider how educational leader-scholars might utilize this information in their activities, specifically predicting staff, student, and teacher behavior based on different variables (e.g. betas or coefficients). Using the theoretical readings as a foundation for explaining various regression formulas and consistently referencing the conversation the students were having previously regarding Apple (2003) paved the way for students to not only accept this information but to desire to understand and apply it to their own local contexts. Through this connection, students were able to witness, participate, and learn from a uniquely positive, constructivist approach while utilizing this information for their respective projects, which upholds the spirit of the Leader-Scholar Communities and, we believe, facilitates a uniquely engaging yet widely applicable education for students interested in being leaders.

$$y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x_i + \epsilon_i, \quad i = 1, \dots, N.$$

Get in Where You Fit In: Is the Ed.D. Right for You?

Is the Ed.D. the little brother of the Ph.D.? Is the Ed.D. inferior, superior, both, neither? Undoubtedly the academic community will continue to thoughtfully discuss the social location of the Ed.D.; however, as those discussions play out, we contend a much more important approach is to consider what's best for those involved in the programs – namely the future school leaders. For students in the Leader-Scholar Communities and other such programs, an educational doctorate is not a truncated Ph.D., rather it is the practical guidance and experience they seek. These students are not merely recipients of information espoused from an expert; they are generating and repackaging the information given to them in every class in an effort to improve directly their local schools and, ultimately, the opportunities and experiences of the students in their respective schools. We believe this approach is not anachronistic in today's educational structure, rather it is a model of teaching and learning forged in practicality, impact, and access, and likely generates much more unique applications than the voluminous dissertations oft-lauded in academia's ivory towers. Consequently, as educational leaders consider how to prepare the future leaders of their schools and districts, the academic community might do well to focus on how to learn from these leaders in a symbiotic manner, which begins by walking out to the garage and visiting the schoolhouses where teachers and principals are currently working to improve education.

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