Dissertation Journeys of Scholar-Practitioners in an Educational Leadership for Social Justice Program

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The task of guiding the development of scholar-practitioners as leaders for social justice is inherently challenging. The dissertation journey, unlike any other journey practitioner-based doctoral students face in urban school settings, provides a steep learning curve as they transition from practitioner to scholar-practitioner. This journey challenges doctoral students, particularly those who represent the marginalized students they serve, as they begin to understand their personal history, how they view themselves, how they view others, and the ethical and political issues (Creswell, 2013) they face as their thinking shifts from that of a mere practitioner to that of a scholar-practitioner. This collection of case studies on dissertation research emerged from the collective work of faculty, students, and program graduates of the Educational Leadership for Social Justice Doctoral Program at California State University at East Bay. As we examine the development of scholar-practitioners' research, we consider the role of faculty in supporting not merely the research, but more importantly the work to pursue more equitable outcomes in schools and society. The selected cases represent the complex task of preparing scholar-practitioners to lead for social justice.

There are several overarching principles that guide our work preparing PK-16 school leaders to become scholars who engage in research addressing inequities and oppression in their learning communities. We have an ethical responsibility to interrogate systems, organizational frameworks, and leadership theories that privilege certain groups and/or perspectives over others (Capper, 1993; Donmoyer, Imber, & Scheurich, 1995). We have a duty to challenge oppression in all forms and an obligation to interrogate how schools and administrators often silence students who are culturally different (Larson, 1997; Larson & Ovando, 2001;Valenzuela, 1999). We have a duty to transform schools from being sorting mechanisms in the larger global market—where people of color, women, and the disenfranchised are prepared to fit a particular role in society (Anyon, 1980; Aronowitz & Giroux,1993; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977)—to being institutions of hope and social change (Lopez, 2003, p.70).

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based doctoral students face in our urban school settings, provides a steep learning curve as they transition from practitioner to scholar-practitioner. This journey challenges doctoral students, particularly those who represent the marginalized students they serve, as they begin to understand their personal history, how they view themselves, how they view others, and the ethical and political issues (Creswell, 2013) they face as their thinking shifts from that of a mere practitioner to that of a scholar-practitioner.

This collection of case studies on dissertation research emerged from the collective work of faculty, students, and program graduates of the Educational Leadership for Social Justice Doctoral Program at California State University at East Bay. Doctoral students in the program work full-time in educational settings and dedicate their "time off" to the study and pursuit of equitable learning opportunities for students. Moreover, they are often first-generation doctoral students who face additional challenges of securing a terminal degree. In many cases, their parents have not "completed a college degree or beyond;" they grapple with unjust barriers and confront hostile conditions due to their being marginalized on the structural axes of race, class, gender, and age; and they are chief caretakers for "dependent children" (Gardner, 2013, p.44).

As we examine the development of scholar-practitioners' research, we consider the role of faculty in supporting not merely the research, but more importantly the work to pursue more equitable outcomes in schools and society. The selected cases represent the complex task of preparing scholar-practitioners to lead for social justice. The first case addresses the issue of a student who enters the program wanting to save the world, but needing to decide on the "slice of work" to address. The second focuses upon coaching a leader who has his conclusion in mind before he gathers his data because, based on his personal and professional experience, he knows how to fix the inequities he sees. The third case highlights the dilemma faced when the data of an emerging scholar-practitioner is called into question because it illuminates inequitable resource allocation across districts. The final case examines the role of a scholar-practitioner who knows the research and holds a position to lead for social justice, yet must operate within a larger context of fear and distrust.

We share these cases from the perspective of participant-observers. As faculty we support the research as well as the leadership development of our doctoral students. We observe, but we also shape the work they do as we pose questions, offer resources, and interrogate their thinking as well as their actions.

In the Beginning…

This graduate student entered our program having a great concern in the effectiveness of the district's rapid pace in the development of *wrap-around* services designed to assist students and families as they traversed the landscape in K-12 schools. While this was a worthy area of focus, she began to realize (under my probing questions), that she may be prematurely researching a "new" reform her district is implementing to reduce the unequal outcomes among various student groups. Her probing into the effectiveness of wrap-around services was very broad, the data sparse, and at this point, would not be supported. However, not to discourage her from the issues of services that have been put in place for students at-risk of not achieving their educational goals, I encouraged to her look at a specific service that she felt had not drawn public outcries. Her search for a specific service offered to students led her to look into the district's program and services for pregnant and parenting teens. She found that on a national level up to 70% of teen mothers dropped out of school before they received their high school diplomas (Berglas et al., 2003) and pregnant and parenting teens represented approximately 26% of the total percentage of all high school dropouts (Bridgeland et al., 2006). With this in mind she discovered that her district's data was similar to the national statistics. However, she unwittingly connected teen pregnancy as a major contributor to the socioeconomic status of families who populate urban districts, thus confirming her personal beliefs that pregnant and parenting teens are destined to a life of poverty and a to be a burden on society. Yet, a question emerged foremost on her mind: as a public school educator, how could her proposed research contribute to better support for pregnant and parenting teens in order to decrease their dropout rates? As she continued to look into teen pregnancy as a viable research area she discovered that the teen that wished to stay in the K-12 system faced many obstacles in achieving her educational goals.

As the graduate student emerged as a researcher she began to look at a *thin slice* of pregnant and parenting teens, and found that these teens faced many transitions in order to complete their educational journeys, yet many eventually succeeded. Pushing her to probe deeper, she began to question whether the success of a teen in achieving her academic goals was a result of the existing program's design, or if it was the teen's individual determination, in spite of a program, that determined her success in achieving her educational goals. However, instead of taking the deficit approach, I encouraged her to focus on the attributes of pregnant and parenting teens that assisted in their determination to achieve their goals.

Through a continuous cycle of questioning and probing transitional theories the student researcher proposed to investigate the strategies of teens who are/were successful in balancing pregnancy and/or parenting while making progress towards achieving their academic goals. Therefore, looking at, and understanding, what motivated, influenced, enabled, and/or empowered pregnant and parenting teens to continue their education would be more beneficial to students who are struggling in the existing district's program. Ultimately, the student's purpose for this study was to investigate the strategies that students themselves use to motivate, influence, enable, and empower themselves to advocate on their own behalf.

Through my insistence that a theoretical framework would assist in framing her research focus, and subsequently her overarching and sub research questions, the student researcher discovered Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981), which described the process of analyzing individual characteristics and external occurrences of teens as they move through various stages of life. Because teens are continuously evolving, Schlossberg (1981) postulated that there are three major characteristics that influence their outcome: (1) the characteristics of the particular transition, (2) the characteristics of the context in which one lives in, and (3) the characteristics of the one's ability to cope with a transition. The combination of these three factors produces an outcome: successful adaption or failure to adapt.

Using the voice of teens, the student- researcher's goal was to identify those transitional skills students employ to make a successful transition to parenthood while pursuing and attaining their academic goals in the K-12 system. To explore this transition the scholar-practitioner constructed her overarching and subsequent questions around Schlossberg's *4S's*: (Situation) How do students explain the situation they are facing?; (Self) What characteristics and/or attributes do pregnant and parenting teens possess that enable them to navigate the transitions required to remain academically successful in school?; (Support) What collaborative services assisted pregnant and parenting teens in transitioning from childhood to adulthood?; (Strategy) As teens transitioned through the stages of pregnancy to motherhood and parenting, how do they utilize the services that are provided to help them meet their academic goals?; and (Support) In what ways can the district's collaborative partners improve services to re-engage pregnant and parenting teens that have dropped out of school?

The participants in this current study, pregnant or parenting teens between the ages of 15-19 years old, are enrolled in the district's Cal Safe Pregnant and Parenting Program. Foremost

on the scholar-practitioner's mind are the many the obstacles she may encounter with this vulnerable group of teens and ways to anticipate, as well as to alleviate, the anxiety that teens may encounter, from emotional discomforts to the potential loss of privacy due to their participation in a focus group setting.

Reflections on the Journey

Working with this graduate student allowed me to revisit Schlossberg's transitional theory, particularly the 4S's, to better understand how to assist graduate students in the many transitions needed for them to navigate through their dissertation journeys. Like school systems, we, too, are constantly seeking to connect research in order to enact and advocate social justice principles for those who continually confront marginalizing practices in their own journeys.

Struggling Through the Process...

As a high school principal of a diverse, high-poverty school, this doctoral student entered the program with knowledge based on his experience as a student, teacher and new administrator that our schools were failing African American and Latino(a) students. The district he serves has 19,000 or 52% of K-12 students receiving free and reduced lunch. The student demographic population is comprised of African American 24%, White 24%, Hispanic 34% and English Language Learner (ELL) 19%. Early on the doctoral student identified the root cause of student's failure to achieve to be teachers and administrators who didn't understand and/or value the students. His year one qualifying paper did not pass because he consistently stated his own opinion as fact and did not provide an appropriate literature review or clearly focused problem statement.

As faculty chair of his dissertation committee I asked this doctoral student to examine literature on the deficit education model's foundation. As he read he began to develop language and a construct to identify the issues with which he was struggling. He wanted to understand and describe how the K-12 educational system operates based on fixing the weaknesses of students of color and does not allow for an understanding of the strengths students bring with them to school. Specifically, his research proposal centered on his conclusion that academic success was not even possible for African Americans males (AAM) learning in a deficit model of education. Once again he had the answers in his description of the focus topic. He stated that he had

intimate knowledge of AAM students in his district who contradict the negative stereotypes and yet face the day-to-day deficit framework in their schools. He believed the deficit education framework to be a cornerstone of the inequities in our educational system. As his Chair, I once again needed to ask him to step back and take on the perspective of a scholar-practitioner. This doctoral student had a tendency to view things from an either/or perspective and move between his own personal experiences as an African American male as a student in the deficit framework to his experience working with African American male students in his district. The struggle to find his topic moved from year one into year two and he changed topics three times during that period. A turning point for this doctoral student occurred when he was able to articulate the relevance of his own personal experience, an auto-ethnography of sorts, as an African American male raised by a single mother who had helped him achieve academic success in high school.

The examination of why the African American males (AAM) are academically successful is now the focus of his research. He specifically examined AAM raised by single mothers who have successfully completed high school. Academic success is being measured by achieving a high school diploma on time. This benchmark of the attainment of a high school diploma is being used because the current national data indicates only 52% of AAM's obtain high school diplomas (Holzman, 2012). Other data indicate that African American males are less likely than white males to complete high school (21.5% vs. 11.5%) and, if they do complete high school, they are less likely to earn a bachelor's degree (16.4% vs. 31.7%, respectively) (Jenkins, 2006; Gantt & Greif, 2009).

Our dissertation journey is not finished as of yet. This emerging scholar-practitioner is now conducting interviews and transcribing them to begin the coding and labeling of themes that emerge. He has identified the following research questions: What factors contribute to the academic success of African American males who come from single parent households headed by mothers? What are common beliefs and child rearing strategies that single African American mothers use when raising their sons? And what effect (if any) does self-efficacy play in the lives of African American male students who manage to overcome all social obstacles and achieve academic success?

Reflections on the Journey

This African American doctoral student has had a constant internal battle regarding how

to take on the role of the researcher. The content of his study has allowed his own personal experiences as an African American male attending schools that operated from a deficit model to surface while he is now working in a district that is also working primarily from a deficit model. My prodding the doctoral student to examine the social justice and equity issue of his topic was a constant push and pull dynamic. In my role as chair of his dissertation committee I have continually found that he needs to be pushed through a use of probing questions to force him to dig deeper and to require him to pull apart his statements. He has had a difficult time and has been stuck during every phase of the dissertation process. The internal battle arose during the development of the problem statement, research questions, literature review, methodology design and as he begins to analyze his findings because he didn't realize (and still hasn't reached that "aha moment") that he consistently uses his own experience as the model instead of allowing the dissertation process and case studies to emerge with their own themes. As an African American woman who recently completed my dissertation in 2011 I was able to understand his experience of not being able to separate his own identity from that of the participants. I used this understanding to push, probe, and prod when necessary. As Chair, I believe that he will obtain that "aha moment" and internalize a critical thinking perspective that will serve him well as a scholar- practitioner. This doctoral student's capacity to share findings from the field in the context of a critical frame will serve him not only as a researcher, but as a leader positioned to improve current conditions for students.

Navigating the Committee…

A dedicated science and mathematics teacher, this doctoral student originally began researching equitable learning opportunities for urban youth through student engagement in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). Amidst the literature review, this emerging scholar-practitioner inevitably found that students in low-income (high poverty) school districts (mostly African-American and Latino(a)) often do not receive high quality math and science instruction from highly qualified teachers to help bridge students' learning and achievement gaps. Moreover, "teacher quality [is] seen as a key policy lever to narrow the achievement gaps that [exist] along racial and economic lines" (Liston, Borko, & Whitcomb, 2008).

At the same time, the scholar-practitioner's interaction with teachers throughout the Bay

Area heightened his understanding of inequitable resources and vast differences in teacher quality between extremely privileged communities and his own district that serves a diverse student population, with more than 70% of students qualifying for free and reduced meals. His research pivoted from determining how teachers might optimize student learning by honing their skills, to questioning the impact of revenue and resources - particularly teacher quality (as measured by years of experience, credentials, and higher education degrees) - on student achievement. Discovering the data about revenue and resource disparity between school districts became this scholar-practitioner's passion. As a former superintendent I had long struggled with the cavernous divide between the resources available to students in extremely affluent school districts as opposed to districts populated with children whose parents confront a daily struggle to put food on the table. So, when this doctoral student abruptly shifted topics, I heartily encouraged his desire to delve into the intricate business of school finance to determine if funding truly does make a difference for students.

This scholar-practitioner developed his study based on the concept that U.S. public schools strive to provide a path to the middle class for children from hard-working families in every community, particularly those who live in poverty (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). He began to document and examine inequities in the amount of revenues and expenditures for the public school system throughout the nation. His literature review included evidence that children today in our neediest schools are more likely to have the least qualified teachers, which is why great teaching in the educational system is a daily fight for social justice (Duncan, 2009).

This scholar-practitioner outlines how, throughout the nation, districts and schools are primarily funded through a combination of state, local, and federal funding. School districts serving lower income students often receive less state and local funding than those serving more affluent children (Background & Analysis, 2014). Thus, the purpose of this doctoral student's research is to (1) examine whether or not there are equitable sources of revenue in California public schools, (2) examine whether or not there is an equitable distribution of expenditures in California public schools, and (3) ascertain if the school finance reform efforts of No Child Left Behind (2001) increased per pupil expenditures, produced higher student achievement for underserved students, and improved teacher quality.

This scholar-practitioner is collecting data from several districts disparate in their demographics, revenue, and expenditures in order to conduct his quantitative study. Public

databases provide the data for a regression analysis aimed at answering the following research questions: What is the relationship between per pupil expenditures (PPE) and teacher quality (as measured by credential and years of experience)? What is the relationship between per pupil expenditures (PPE) and teacher salaries? And what is the relationship between per pupil expenditures (PPE) and student achievement?

A troubling issue of leadership for social justice arose in the institutional process of approving the dissertation proposal. The dissertation committee is comprised of a faculty chair, another higher education expert in the field, and a practitioner with a doctoral degree who is typically a site, district, county or state leader in TK-12 education. Upon reading drafts of the dissertation proposal, and in the proposal defense, the practitioner committee member, whose work experience was in high-income districts, noted that "affluent districts don't get the same level of federal and state funding" due to lower numbers of socio-economically disadvantaged students and other categorizations that generate special federal and state funding; thus, school district funding tends to be equitable. In other words, the practitioner advocated that, in reality, total funding is comparable among all districts. While acknowledging the committee member's helpful suggestions regarding the inclusion of various data points to ensure accuracy in the quantitative study, the doctoral student possesses a valid concern that the member's bias to push for the "right" finding of equitable revenue and resources among school districts might derail the dissertation research. Hopefully, this scholar-practitioner's fastidious research skills, and ability to articulate methodology and findings, will serve to demonstrate the validity and reliability of findings when presented in the dissertation defense. This doctoral student will need support and guidance should the study findings contradict the committee member's viewpoint regarding equitable school funding.

Reflections on the Journey

Doctoral students who boldly interrogate inequity and injustice may find difficulty in navigating the landscape of a committee member's own experiences and pre-conceived notions, conscious or unconscious. Acknowledging a committee member's viewpoint and his/her position in society, juxtaposed with support for this scholar-practitioner research, is not new to me as the faculty member who serves as chair in the dissertation process. However, the duty to encourage and embolden doctoral students becomes even more critical as they pursue research to

address issues of equity and social justice. The role of faculty in a leadership position for a social justice program is to not only support high quality research, but to provide opportunities to share research findings that may not be popular. In this case the process of changing hearts and minds may begin before the dissertation is even published.

Taking Action…

At the beginning of her final year in the doctoral program this student was hired as an Assistant Superintendent in a district where Latino students comprise almost a third of the total student population. Drawing upon her doctoral studies and prior leadership work in the field, she immediately sought spaces where she could research and ultimately influence Latino family involvement in schools. She learned that the English learners in her new district showed proficiency levels of only 27% in English Language Arts and 37% in mathematics (CDE, 2013) and that there had been little to no increase in test scores over the past five years. She also found that less than 50 percent of Latino families identify their students as English Language Learners. Prior experience led her to wonder if the low rate of identification as second language learners was based on a stigma related to immigration and/or social class. She was excited to discover that the district had partnered with a faith-based organization to strategically increase Latino parent involvement in the schools. The partnership was created to build relationships and share knowledge in a safe, welcoming environment. This partnership organizes events for the Latino community around the topics of health, mathematics, science, college entrance and early childhood education. The events, as well as the partnership itself, have evolved over the years, from short presentations before church services, to afternoon events with information, activities and a meal.

The doctoral student recognized the historical and cultural context for her study noting that though the 1948 case of Mendez v. Westminster ended *de jure* segregation of students of color in the state of California (six years prior to the landmark Brown v. Board of Education decision) these legal cases did not address the larger societal issues contributing to continued marginalization of students and their families. DeGaetano's research (2007) illustrates the devaluing of Latino families. Other studies focusing on the importance and impact of family involvement on student achievement highlight implicit expectations as to how parents should be involved. Parent involvement requires knowledge not just of the language, but of the system and

culture of schools. Schools operate under the assumption that all parents are comfortable participating in school activities and serving as advocates for their children yet the knowledge and ability to maneuver through these types of educational conversations is a form of social capital (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2010; Noguera, 2004). Based on research that student achievement levels can be directly tied to levels of parent engagement and involvement and that the marginalization of Latino parents may be the major contributing factor to their lack of engagement and viability in their child's school, the emerging scholar-practitioner proposed the research question: In what ways does a partnership between a Latino faith-based organization and a school district affect Latino parent involvement in schools?

As an Assistant Superintendent, new to the district and with little fluency in Spanish, the doctoral student was coached by the Parish priest and the ELL Coordinator about how to gather her data. She was cautioned not to record parent interviews and was told to *dress down* so she would not look too official. She soon found that some Board Members were skeptical about her work with the Latino community and wanted access to her research (raw data) before it was to be published. In the analysis of her interviews and field notes, the political context of her study emerged.

Storey's research (2014) found the following:

The theme of fear resonated throughout this research project, the fear that undocumented families have of being discovered and the partnership's acceptance of that fear. There is no advertising of the events. Everyone who participates in the partnership is interviewed for their agenda, personal or otherwise. These responses to the fear, no advertising and careful vetting of participants came solely from the organizations in the partnership. Some of the families spoke of the fear, of how, as a community they work together in solidarity to work within the system they fear. (p.155)

The families that I spoke with were very aware of what the church offered regarding the various family events and presentations. None of those I spoke with were aware that the local school district had anything to do with the events. Even more concerning than the disconnection between the school district and the church was the disconnection between the families and the schools; most didn't know the principal's name or that of their child's teacher's. There were so many missed opportunities. (p. 154)

Reflections on the Journey

Throughout the study this scholar-practitioner observed many *missed opportunities* in the disconnect between school practices and the Latino community. Beyond supporting this scholar-researcher in gathering, analyzing and sharing her data, as dissertation chair I became her confidant and ally in thinking through actionable next steps given the political realities she faces as a leader. This scholar-practitioner has taken the opportunity to build upon the relationships she established during the study to begin connecting school leaders with parent leaders. She employs an assets-based approach to the Latino community and challenges school leaders to examine traditional practices to include families in new ways (i.e. adapting the individual parent-teacher conference protocol). She applies theories of agency and social capital as she designs plans for deeper community engagement and school improvement. Her research makes her ever mindful of the fears Latino families, as well as their church and district allies face, yet she takes considered steps forward to create inclusive and effective school and family partnerships. Her work on behalf of Latino families will continue to inform our university work to prepare new leaders.

Final Thoughts

As a faculty committed to *walking the talk* in leadership for social justice, we further our collective work by sharing our dissertation journeys with scholar-practitioners. We learn from one another. We conclude this piece by sharing the questions we posed to our panel audience at the Equity and Social Justice conference that took place at Buffalo State College: What is your work? What does it take to lead for social justice? What are your challenges and fears? Who are your allies? To what degree do you feel prepared? What are the potential political consequences of your leadership? What role does your racial, gender, and class identity play in your approach to leading for social justice? We find the dissertation journey to be fraught with challenges, but if we don't address the inequities we see, who will?

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