Scholarship With a Reach

Lori B. Doyle
Concordia University Irvine, lori.doyle@cui.edu

Tanya M. Tarbutton
Concordia University Irvine, tanya.tarbutton@cui.edu

Kellie L. Albrecht
Concordia University Irvine, kellie.albrecht@cui.edu

Scholarship with a Reach

Graduate students enter a master's program each with uniquely diverse experiences and perspectives which influence each individual's trajectory of learning and the scope and reach of their efforts as a result of the program. What one student hopes to achieve may be vastly different than what another aspires to attain. The field of education is ever changing, interconnected, and global and the problem one program participant hopes to tackle is specific to that individual and the school or district for which they work. This means programs of study, and culminating projects specifically, must be designed to allow the individual to enact change in their school community. University faculty must consider how to attend to differences while simultaneously preparing students to forge ahead in scholarly learning at the advanced level and then take that learning into the world. Within graduate programs these challenges may be exacerbated as program directors and designers consider effective ways to cultivate autonomy within the learning environment so that program participants can adopt and implement new knowledge and skills within far reaching educational settings. Master's level students are generally qualified as adult learners who triumph when learning experiences are organized as autonomic and reveal real world connections (Knowles et al., 2020). Favorable educational changes, with a reach into school communities, can transpire when adult learners are encouraged to participate in authentic, self-directed learning activities grounded in the tenets of organizational change theory. One university's approach will be discussed as a model for capitalizing on organizational change theory when designing culminating projects for master's level learners.

Theoretical Framework

Social science examines constructed elements surrounding human connections and behaviors. Simply stated, social science is grounded in studying how individuals interact with each other. Research within the field of education is often examined through the social science lens whereby problems or phenomena are analyzed and potential explanations are afforded (Ivanović & Ho, 2019). A need to explore ways to enact organizational change in a far-reaching way, through advanced scholarship in a master's level education program, has been identified as a problem space and a methodological approach was used to examine evidence-based best practices as supported by the literature. An objectivist deductive approach, which means the research is moving in the direction of theory toward data, not the other way around, was employed by the authors (Varpio et al., 2020). This paper will serve primarily as a connection between a theoretical framework based on the tenets of organizational change theory and purposefully designed culminating projects focused on providing opportunities for master's level learners to enact change in a far-reaching and individualized manner. Suggestions for future research will serve as the impetus for data to flow from the theoretical foundation and practical

examples provided in this paper. The authors will investigate the theory of organizational change and draw implications based on their experiences as graduate-level directors within the School of Education at one university.

Organizational Change Theory

For the purposes of this paper, a paraphrased version of a seminal definition of organizational change will be used. Van de Ven and Poole (1995) described change as the observation of difference, in some form, that happens over time in one or more dimensions of an entity (i.e., workplace, organization, working group). If schools are understood as organizations within the field of education, then the description of change as that which leads to effective adaptations adds another layer of meaning in the school context (Deszca et al., 2019). The authors of the article went on to explain the importance of change as action-oriented, not passive. A key distinction for consideration is the unit of change within the following suggested levels: individual, group, organization, population, and even larger communities (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). Each of these units can be described using education as the entity making organizational change theory an appropriate foundation when supporting scholarship and research in a master's program designed for school professionals.

Application in an Education Context

The authors of this paper contend that a school campus and even a classroom can represent an entity for education professionals. With this in mind, teachers, administrators, and school counselors have the ability and opportunity to enact change on a range of levels, or perhaps, a concerted degree of change on a specific level. Understanding the reach of each education professional is a starting point for higher education institutions that provide graduate-level degrees. Yet, graduate program directors and instructors cannot possibly know the type or level of change needed on every campus for which program participants work. This is where organizational change must be built into the curriculum through projects that get education professionals thinking about and better equipped to enact an observable difference in a dimension of interest and scope readily available to them at a classroom, school, or district level.

The Approach of One University

The authors of this paper work in the School of Education for a private Christian liberal arts university located in Southern California. To create, maintain, and promote both a practical yet excellent approach, strong partnerships that produce a multidirectional impact are actively forged. Establishing a reputation of excellence with neighboring school districts provides ongoing opportunities to collaborate and

communicate regarding programmatic needs and feedback (Schlichtemeier & Doyle, 2022). Having a reach that extends beyond university walls or syllabi pages is of great consequence. This goal is supported through culminating research experiences that draw on the tenets of organizational change theory through encouraging what Deszca et al. (2019) referred to as effective adaptations within a context.

Culminating projects take different forms depending on the specific program focus. For example, capstone projects within non-credentialed programs are designed to help participants utilize critical reflection to analyze lived experiences and address an educational problem. Projects within credentialed programs focus on authentic learning experiences conducted in real-world settings and participants create digital portfolios. All capstone projects serve as a culmination of learning objectives and promote research-based decisions and educational change with various educational organizations with which program participants are affiliated. Through each capstone and portfolio project, the institution extends its reach into the field of education and, consequently, the classrooms and lives impacted by each graduate.

Capstone Project

Capstone projects provide participants with an opportunity to become educational leaders, change-agents, and experts in their respective fields of study. For each participant, the project is a culminating task that highlights learning which has transpired over the duration of the program. The project focuses on examining an educational problem through a qualitative, exploratory, critically self-reflective lens to enact change and or improvement in educational organizations. In a four-chapter research paper, participants reveal the problem, purpose, and subjectivity statement, conduct a thorough review of the literature, discuss the exploratory qualitative method, critically self-reflect on the research topic, and discover results through a triangulation of the data. Capstone completers are to consider furthering their research beyond completion of their master's degree and activating their intervention or ideas at their organizations.

The capstone researcher learns to critically analyze an experience to transform their thoughts into belief (Dewey, 1933), which validates the results and actions to follow (Mortari, 2015). Since the experience of the critical incident is personalistic, the research involves a social constructivist framework with stakeholder collaboration to substantiate the conclusions. The intellectual steps taken to break down an incident and critically reflect on the occurrence, from beginning to end, supports educators with higher-level thinking skills to make informative decisions and positive change in a variety of educational settings. The reflective practice involves answering deep questions about the problem and how it can be observed from various perspectives; for example, the researcher thinks back to the situation while revisiting the emotions they felt and the actions they

took. Participants are prompted to think of the problem in different contexts - How may the situation be viewed according to the client (i.e., students, parents, faculty, staff, stakeholders, etc.)? How did emotions and/or personal biases influence the researcher's thoughts and actions during the incident? How has literature portrayed the problem and possible solutions? How might a reflective partner see the problem and solutions, and what are their thoughts on the researcher's view? The reflection becomes critical as students develop self-awareness within social and political contexts, staying mindful of power issues in professional work relationships (Bassot, 2023). Recognizing the context of their role in the workplace and the impact their actions may have are instrumental steps for the reflective process.

The far reaching impact of completed capstone projects has been substantiated through graduate feedback as well as ongoing communication measures with partner districts. Program participants have used capstone research projects to enact organizational change at school sites, district offices, communities, and local, state, and federal government agencies. Past project examples provide a glimpse into the type and extent of the capstone reach. A district-wide program for at-risk students has produced significant results in improving student engagement and academic success while turning student attention away from a life of crime and poverty. Other projects have focused on bringing in community stakeholders to partner with schools to provide resources for students and families. Additionally, some capstone completers focused on and created curriculum in areas such as social-emotional learning, technological pedagogy, and a servant leadership approach to organizational change. Graduates leave with an abundance of knowledge to employ newly acquired skills to directly improve the organizational environment for those they serve.

Professional Portfolio

An administration MA program must also provide a pathway to meeting all standards tied to a state-issued credential. Participants are tasked with creating a digital portfolio to track professional growth as it relates to the identified state standards. Culminating projects in master's programs that include an integrated credential focus on participation in authentic activities, which demonstrate a school professional's competence as it relates to predetermined state standards. Partnerships with stakeholders, including district and site-based administrators, colleagues, and parents are essential when supporting participants during this process. Formation of the professional portfolio is a program-long endeavor that requires participants to record and document involvement in relevant field experiences under the guidance of a site-based practitioner as well as a university supervisor. The digital portfolio acts as a tool for participants to showcase their academic achievements and professional experiences and highlight their desire and readiness for career advancement.

According to the Association of American Colleges and Universities, the construction and implementation of individualized digital portfolios were positively correlated with accelerated student outcomes (Watson et al., 2016). Personal autonomy is embraced and celebrated as participants emphasize their unique experiences and opportunities as illustrated within their portfolios. Each portfolio contains evidence of ways an individual can and will continue to enact change in a sphere of influence to include the possibility of new leadership roles as a result of degree completion. The institution's reach into the community and field is multiplied every time a program graduate puts portfolio initiatives and goals into action. One example is when participants have used their authentic field-based experiences as opportunities to enact comprehensive change at the state level through their involvement with the Association of California School Administrator's Legislative Action Day initiative whereby participants lobby on regulations and policies impacting PreK-12 schools and stakeholders. Another example is the development and implementation of a district-level podcast designed to leverage and support educators' instructional best practices and personal well-being. Outcomes such as these accentuate the extensive impact the completion of the professional portfolio has on the community at large when organizational change is cultivated.

Suggestions for Future Research

There are additional research opportunities or possible ways to extend this theory-to-practice data to analyze the phenomenon of culminating research opportunities with a reach that extends beyond program completion (Ivanović & Ho, 2019). The authors of this paper embraced an objectivist deductive approach to extend organizational change theory in the field of education and to suggest future pathways for collecting data and measuring effectiveness (Varpio et al., 2020). The theoretical implications of this paper provide for qualitative and quantitative research extensions based on the link between organizational change theory and the field of education as an entity of focus. Higher education organizations should consider the extent to which culminating projects allow participants an opportunity to enact change in their respective settings. Empirical research in the form of qualitative interviews could produce an understanding of principals' perceptions of teachers who completed capstone projects and the type or degree of change produced as a result. A quantitative research study could be designed to collect data using the Openness Toward Organizational Change Scale (OTOCS) to compare differences between populations of school professionals. Correlations between openness toward organizational change, again measured by using the OTOCS, and variables such as burnout, self-efficacy, and job satisfaction could be determined. The larger body of knowledge on organizational change theory should include additional and ongoing research specific to the field of education as a domain in

which lifelong learning and graduate-level education can lead to more than individual advancement.

Conclusion

Student success and degree completion are goals of any higher education program (Prakash, 2018) yet need not describe the only outcomes. Institutions with graduate degrees can use this lens when creating and maintaining curriculum aimed at arming educators to make a difference in their respective educational settings during and well after graduation. Action-oriented change is that which (Deszca et al. (2019) described as indicative of an approach based on the tenets of organizational change theory.

Higher education institutions must embrace a role in the continued development of society (Dziminska et al., 2018). This expectation can work in support of graduate-student success through purposeful, action-based, critically reflective research or portfolio expectations. Based on the tenets of organizational change theory, partnerships extend to every district, school community, and student population that benefits from the relevant and immediate implications discovered through each capstone or portfolio project. A theoretical foundation based on organizational change theory and practical applications in the context of education were combined to show how one university continues to have a far reach into classrooms, schools, and districts due to culminating projects designed to set graduates up for enacting change in their respective organizations throughout the state and country and across the globe.

About the Authors

Dr. Lori Doyle works as Associate Professor of Education at Concordia University Irvine where she serves as Director of the Master of Arts in Educational Leadership program. She has completed and managed extensive curriculum development projects at the university and serves as Subject Matter Expert for courses in multiple MA programs. Working as an instructor also keeps her mindful of relevant and changing trends in education. Lori has taught at several universities over the past twenty-two years, but her career began as a high school English and theology teacher and curriculum writer. She holds a California Clear Credential in Secondary Education, MAEd in Curriculum and Instruction, and a PhD in Psychology with an emphasis in Cognition. Her areas of research interest are adult education, Biblical contexts, leadership, curriculum, and faculty mental health.

Dr. Tanya Tarbutton works as Associate Professor of Education at Concordia University, Irvine where she serves as Program Director for MAEd; School

Administration emphasis. Professor Tarbutton has worked as a supervisor and instructor at several higher education institutions in Southern California, mentoring and supporting new administrators and teachers. In this capacity she evaluated and prepared administrative candidates as well as teacher candidates for teaching and learning in the 21st Century. Before entering higher education, Dr. Tarbutton worked as a site based school administrator, resource teacher and general education teacher. She brings a unique perspective grounded in more than 25 years of career experience. Her areas of research include adult education, curriculum design and instruction, and school administration and leadership.

Dr. Kellie Albrecht works as Professor of Education at Concordia University Irvine where she serves as Assistant Dean for the School of Education and Senior Director of the Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) in Leadership program. Dr. Albrecht's experience in higher education includes Ed.D., MAED, and post-baccalaureate program development and improvement, faculty training and professional development, advising graduate and postgraduate qualitative and mixed-methods research projects, teaching undergraduate, graduate, and multiple and single subject credential courses, supervising student teachers in the field, assessing teaching performance assessments (TPAs), and facilitating TPA student workshops. Prior to teaching in higher education, Dr. Albrecht was an elementary school educator having taught in grades 1-6. Her experience working with culturally diverse and underrepresented children led to an interest in English language development and differentiated instructional practices.

References

Bassot, B. (2023). *The reflective practice guide: An interdisciplinary approach to critical reflection (2nd ed.)*. Routledge.

Deszca, G., Ingols, C., & Cawsey, T. F. (2019). *Organizational change: An action-oriented toolkit*. Sage Publications.

Dewey, J. (1933). *How we think*. Boston, MA: Heat.

Dziminska, M., Fijalkowska, J., & Sulkowski, L. (2018). Trust-based quality culture conceptual   model for higher education institutions. SUSTAINABILITY, 10(8). https://doi.org/10.3390/su10082599

Ivanović, L., & Ho, Y. S. (2019). Highly cited articles in the education and educational research category in the social science citation Index: A bibliometric analysis. *Educational Review*, *71*(3), 277-286. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2017.1415297

Knowles, M., Holton, E., Swanson, R., & Robinson, P. (2020). *The adult learner:*

The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development (9th ed.). Routledge.

Mortari, L. (2015). Reflectivity in Research Practice: An Overview of Different Perspectives. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406915618045

Prakash, G. (2018). Quality in higher education institutions: Insights from the literature. *The TQM Journal, 30*(6), 732–748 https://doi.org/10.1108/TQM-04-2017-0043

Schlichtemeier, K., & Doyle, L. (2022). Attracting, equipping, and supporting: One partnership at work. *CASUP Connections, 11*(1), 9. http://www.casup.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/2022-11-1_Spring-Summer.pdf

Van de Ven, A. H., & Poole, M. S. (1995). Explaining development and change in organizations. *Academy of management review*, *20*(3), 510-540. http://www.jstor.org/stable/258786 .

Varpio, L., Paradis, E., Uijtdehaage, S., & Young, M. (2020). The distinctions between theory, theoretical framework, and conceptual framework. *Academic Medicine*, *95*(7), 989-994. https://doi.org/10.1097/ACM.0000000000003075

Watson, C., Kuh, G., Rhodes, T., Light, T., & Chen, H. (2016). Editorials: ePortfolios- The eleventh high impact practice. *International Journal of ePortfolio, 6*(2), 65-69. http://www.theijep.com