

1-1-2007

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Recommended Citation

Sherman, Ross B.; Gill, Peggy B.; and Sherman, Cynthia A., "Soup du Jour and So Much More: A Model for School Leader Preparation" (2007). *Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Faculty Publications and Presentations*. Paper 22.
<http://hdl.handle.net/10950/550>

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Soup du Jour and So Much More: A Model for School Leader Preparation

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Alice: *Would you tell me please which way I ought to go from here?*

Cheshire: *That depends a great deal on where you want to get to.*

Alice: *I don't much care where—*

Cheshire: *Then it doesn't matter which way you go.*

Alice: *... so long as I get somewhere*

Cheshire: *Oh, you're sure to do that—if you only walk long enough.*

--Alice in Wonderland (Lewis Carroll)

Where to go in principal preparation programs is the question that has surfaced and resurfaced for over 20 years. This question paired with the current political climate that demands strong educational accountability has created a powerful impetus to change, modify, or redesign principal preparation programs.

The past couple of years have been particularly challenging. For example, in one week, the Department of Educational

Leadership and Policy Studies received an e-mail from the Dean, a note from the Provost and a letter from the President all informing us of the report by Arthur Levine entitled *Educating School Leaders* (2005).

However, Dr. Levine's is only the latest report *du jour* to suggest the failures of our public school systems are due in part to the supposedly poor quality of the preparation programs for educational leaders.

Dr. Levine's report joins a long line of distinguished reports over the past 20 years that advocate a variety of approaches and reforms for preparing educational leaders. These range from establishing a clinical study component (Baugh, 2003; Daresh, 2001; Sergiovanni, 1988) to requiring full-time residential study (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 1989); from broadening the scope of administrative preparatory programs to include a traditional academic studies model (Sergiovanni, 1988) to limiting the program to reflect a professional studies model (Baugh, 2003; Bridges and Hallinger, 1993; Daresh, 2001; National Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration, 1987; Shibles, 1988); from delineating degrees for educational leadership practitioners (MEd, EdD) from those designed for educational leadership academicians (MA, MS, PhD) (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 1989).

Although reflection and debate elevate the discourse, it appears over the past 20 years there has been little consensus on the best model for educational leadership preparation. Over 15 years ago, we proposed a model of administrative preparation that suggested it is not "HOW" we prepare educational leaders, but "WHAT" is contained in the leadership preparation program that will make the

difference (Bowser & Sherman, 1989). We would like to revisit and expand on the model previously proposed.

The model is predicated on the belief that an educational leadership preparation program cannot impart all of the knowledge that a future educational leader will need throughout his or her professional career. To assume we could do this would imply that the knowledge base required for excellent school leadership is static and this is clearly not the case. The very fact that we keep revisiting the best way to prepare educational leaders supports the stand that the knowledge base is continually evolving and expanding.

Therefore, the intent of any principal preparation program should be to help future leaders develop and refine their conceptual and intellectual skills to effectively incorporate and utilize the knowledge emerging in this ever-changing field. These skills allow an individual to engage in conceptual thinking such as: critical thinking, problem analysis, decision-making, and leadership. In an attempt to accomplish this outcome, all graduate programs in educational leadership should include four strands: knowledge, skills, beliefs/values, and processes. These four strands are situated within a contextual field of reflective inquiry (see Figure 1).

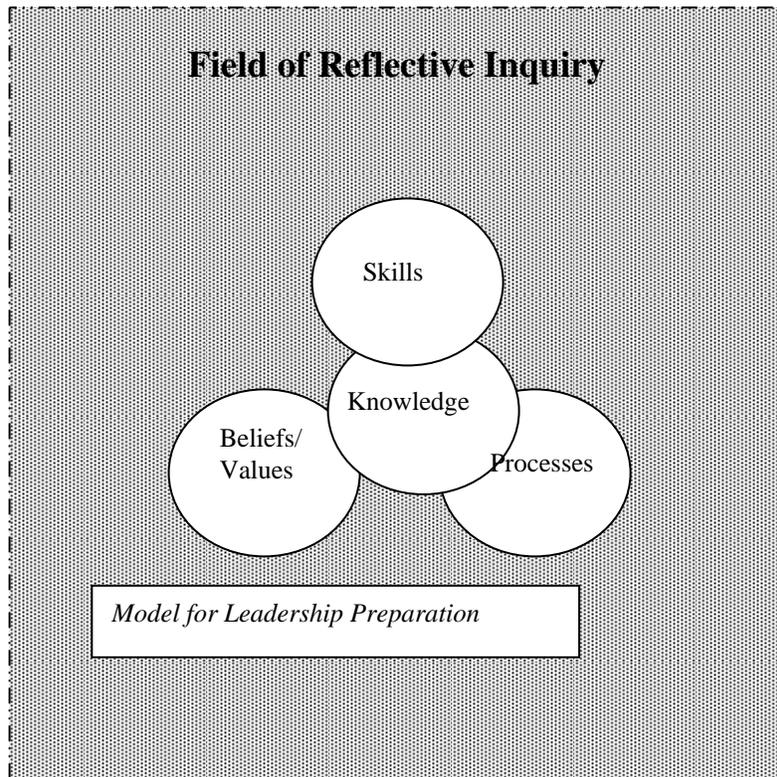


Figure 1. Model for leadership preparation.

The initial strand, knowledge, is the content/theory component. This strand focuses on the foundational knowledge in the field of educational leadership that has been developed through research over the past 80 years. From scientific-management to post modernism, educational leadership thought continues to evolve.

Frequently, this information is imparted through textbooks, readings, and lectures and involves the traditional approach to learning. In addition, this knowledge base includes current information such as laws, policies and mandates that impact school leadership.

This content/theory component is important because it forms the knowledge base from which the other strands evolve. It comprises the educational platform of the student and provides the theory that will guide the individual's practice in the field.

The second strand is the skill component. Each course contains technical competencies that an educational leader must possess to be successful in the field. For instance, human resource development requires proficiency in interviewing, developmental supervision requires conferencing skills, and school business management requires skills in

finance. Mastering these skills increases the efficiency of the educational leader. Professors identify the technical components of each course and provide practical hands-on experiences with these skills.

The third strand is the educational values/beliefs component. It addresses the basic philosophy and precepts of how to be an educational leader and forms the philosophical orientation or stance from which one operates. At a personal level and institutional level, clarification of these beliefs and values establishes a guidance system that provides strength and courage.

The importance of these values and beliefs is fundamental throughout the program. These values and beliefs are what will lead to the establishment of a school culture which translates into the ability to help establish a school vision, mission and set of core values. Some courses may address the issue directly while in other courses the educational leadership faculty models the values rather than providing explicit instruction.

The fourth strand is process. Students learn the courses of action required in the principalship. Throughout the program, students learn to analyze and organize. For example, students are taken through the processes of proposal development and program evaluation. Writing becomes a vehicle for clear expression and communication, but also part of the process of analyzing and organizing. Listening and observing are practiced both within the classroom setting and as part of assignments that take the student into the daily activities of the school.

The final element, which transcends all strands, is reflective inquiry. We suggest this is a field in which all the strands of the program function. Just as in physics where field theory

unifies the fundamental forces into a theoretical frame, we suggest that reflective inquiry is the field that unifies all components of a leadership development program into a consistent whole.

Two forms of reflective inquiry are practiced. First reflective inquiry occurs after reading and discussion. This form of reflection asks the student to identify the main ideas or concepts in the reading or discussion. Next the student identifies how these ideas or concepts relate to his or her personal experiences and considers how this new knowledge will impact future action or learning.

The second type of reflection occurs after students have completed an activity either within the classroom or on the school campus. This reflective inquiry addresses the “4 P’s.” The first “P” involves thinking about the people involved in the activity such as: students, teachers, parents and other stakeholders and the influence they exert on the activity. The second “P” is reflecting on the implications for the position of the principalship. The final two “P’s” are reflecting on the personal and professional impact that the activity has on the leader. Reflective inquiry provides the student an opportunity to engage in introspection, a detailed mental self-examination of feelings, thoughts, and motivation.

At first glance, there may seem to be nothing particularly new or radical about our stance on leadership preparation programs. The elements may be found in many models of leadership. What we believe is different about our approach is the clarity of purpose. Margaret Wheatley (1994) suggests we must have agreement on what we are trying to accomplish and the values by which we are operating and then allow people freedom to accomplish those tasks. Our model is the agreement on what we are trying to accomplish and provides the values by which we are operating.

Conclusion

In 2002, Peterson estimated that by 2007 over 50 % of all principals would retire, resign or leave the profession. Along with this high rate of principal turnover, the school age population is expanding and placing pressure on the system to produce more educational leaders. Simultaneously, the role of the principalship becomes more complex with the expansion and addition of a variety of instructional and non-instructional roles.

The demands of the position have evolved so that traditional leadership methods of preparing administrators are no longer adequate to meet the challenges faced by educational leaders in the new millennium (Levine, 2005; Peterson, 2002). However, it is still incumbent upon each educational leadership program to produce the next generation of leaders. But what is the best approach to producing this next generation of leaders? The authors of this article would

suggest the future of educational leadership lies in the ability to teach the next generation of leaders how to use their conceptual and intellectual skills; in essence, how to think critically, solve problems appropriately, make decisions cogently and provide leadership to the enterprise.

The key to preparing administrators is not “HOW” we choose to prepare future leaders but “WHAT” constitutes the preparation they receive. The proposed model suggests four strands and a unifying theme. The four strands—1) knowledge, 2) skills, 3) educational values/beliefs, and 4) processes—are tied together through a commitment to having future educational leaders engage in reflective analysis through metacognition and introspection throughout the program. Since time immemorial the future belongs to those who can think deeply to solve the challenges of mankind.

Author Biographies

Ross Sherman has served as an elementary teacher, assistant principal and principal. Currently, he is department chair, professor of educational leadership and coordinator of the principalship program at the University of Texas at Tyler.

Peggy Gill has served as a classroom teacher, educational diagnostician, educational consultant and special education administrator. She is currently an associate professor of educational leadership and project director for the GEAR UP grant at the University of Texas at Tyler.

Cynthia Sherman has served as an elementary teacher, librarian and educational consultant in math and science education. Currently, she is a senior lecturer in the department of curriculum and instruction at the University of Texas at Tyler.

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