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The Role of Partnerships in the Professional Doctorate in Education: A Program Application in Educational Leadership

Susan Toft Everson

Despite Levine's recent criticism of university educational administration programs,[1] a number of educational leadership programs have already redesigned their doctoral programs in educational leadership to align with the professional roles for which students seek preparation. An important influence on these programs has been Shulman's work at the Carnegie Foundation.[2] In a symposium focused on findings of Carnegie's Initiative on the Doctorate, Shulman suggested that the framing definition of a doctorate is a degree given to someone who is a steward of the profession. He stated: "We need Ph.D. preparation for scholarship and Ed.D. preparation for practice. Both are rigorous."[3] Current redesigned programs have created such a separation.

Although the terminal degree in these programs for educational leaders is still the Doctor of Education (Ed.D.), not the Master's as Levine recommends, the redesigned Ed.D. programs mirror Levine's call for a curriculum developed to prepare effective leaders. Even though Levine has recommended a redesign for educational leadership programs that would be the "educational equivalent" of a Master's in Business Administration, he adds additional work for those aspiring to the superintendency or other advanced positions.[4] Most students in the redesigned Ed.D. programs aspire to the superintendency; others want system-level leadership positions such as Director of Special Education or Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction. As such, the redesigned Ed.D. programs offer a professional degree that is similar to those in law, medicine, and business.

The intention of the redesigned Ed.D. has been to distinguish it from the Ph.D. that is preparation for scholarship while the Ed.D. program is preparation for practice. For example, the University of Southern California has established a clear delineation between the two programs in the Rossier School of Education, as follows:

> The Ph.D. is research oriented whereas the Ed.D. is directed towards educational practice and the application of theory and research. The Ed.D. is equal in rigor, but different in substance from the Ph.D. Here is how: Ph.D.– theoretical foundations of the field -- Ed.D.– development of special practitioner skill; Ph.D.– application of other foundational or related disciplines -- Ed.D.– application of other educational foundations and techniques; and Ph.D.– research which is directed toward theory building -- Ed.D.– applied research which primarily addresses localized practitioner problems.[5]

Given the purpose of the Ed.D. to prepare students for practice, what is the foundation upon which the design must sit? The new designs include components that incorporate findings from studies of effective leadership practices into a relevant program of study that includes authentic and challenging applications of the curriculum content. While recommendations regarding the structure and content of such programs are being debated, some universities have already tackled the redesign of their Ed.D. programs and are testing those designs now. Saint Louis University (SLU), like the University of Southern California, has designed and implemented a three-year professional doctorate degree in educational administration. The program includes a curriculum focused on effective leadership practices and programmatic and pedagogical formats that replicate and model experiences that students will face in educational leadership positions. One of the most important components of this program is its use of partnerships. For the purposes of this study, a partnership was defined as "one associated with another especially in an action: associate, colleague." [6] The simplicity of this definition captures the sense of partnerships that exist in education settings. It also allows for the variety of associations that educational leaders experience every day. Most of the work of effective educational leaders occurs in partnership with others.

Waters, one of the developers of McREL's research-based "Balanced Leadership Program," identified effective leadership practices.[7] Many of those practices occur in the context of partnerships the leader has with stakeholders in the school community. For example, leaders are engaged in partnership relationships when they "build capacity," "develop a community of purpose," and "create a condition of distributed leadership."[8] Other scholars have reinforced the concept of effective leadership practice embedded in partnership associations. For example, in a research synthesis of principal practices associated with student achievement, Cotton found that leaders in high-achieving schools involve themselves in outreach to parents and other community members; establish and maintain a collaborative school culture; work with their staff members to share leadership and decisions; and engage staff members in professional development and collegial learning activities.[9] All of these actions requires a partnership between the leader and others. Earlier work by Smith and Andrews offered similar findings, suggesting that general descriptions of effective instructional leaders "can be organized into four broad areas of strategic interaction between the principal and teachers: (1) the principal as resource provider; (2) the principal as instructional resource; (3) the principal as communicator, and (4) the principal as visible presence."[10] Each area suggests an association between the leader and other stakeholders, fitting the concept of partnerships.

More recently, Spillane offered an agenda for lines of inquiry that address the "conversation about refocusing scholarship in educational administration in general and educational leadership in particular."[11] Based on his reading of the articles in the *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* special issue on educational leadership, Spillane identified three themes. One theme focused on the notion that leadership exists in "collaborative, collective and coordinated" distributions.[12] These are partnership formats. Educational leaders

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manage this theme and must be prepared to do so as effectively as possible. Finally, Leithwood and Louis suggested: "We have increasing evidence that collective responsibility for student learning, in addition to improved technical teaching practices and curriculum, is a fundamental correlate of student achievement."[13] If this is the case, educational leaders must have knowledge and skills that give them the capacity to create cultures of collective responsibility. By definition, such work is accomplished in partnerships. Any professional preparation program that intends to model experiences that students will face when they complete the program must embed those experiences in the curriculum. In the case of educational leadership preparation, the curriculum must include a variety of opportunities for doctoral students to work in partnerships.

It is important to note here that the value and use of partnerships in education are not new, particularly organizational partnerships between universities and schools.[14] Such partnerships currently exist when school districts and universities create organizational partnerships to offer leadership development programs.[15] In fact, in recent years, SLU has offered several graduate leadership programs in partnership with the Saint Louis School District and other urban districts that ring the city. While these organizational partnerships may further the development of leadership education models, this article focuses on the concept of personal partnerships that educational leaders encounter on a daily basis. It is these daily, personal partnerships that influence the context in which leaders work, and it is these types of partnerships that were built into SLU's redesigned Ed.D. program.

Program Overview

In the 1970s, SLU established an Ed.D. in order to offer a professional degree that focused on practical applications of educational leadership knowledge and skills, whose culminating activity was the completion of a doctoral project. That doctoral project was envisioned as substantially different from the traditional research-based five-chapter dissertations that were written for the Ph.D. The Ed.D. was described as follows in the *2002-2004 Graduate School Catalogue*: "The Ed.D. Degree program is preparation for educational leadership roles through a broadly-based coursework-component and a culminating, extensive project focusing on practical needs within the major field."[16]

Students' doctoral project reports have evolved into major papers that resemble a Ph.D. dissertation although frequently the scope of the research is narrower and less theoretical. The departure from the original intent of the Ed.D. project detracted from the practical orientation of the program, and concerns about this change prompted the faculty to initiate a review of the program with the intention of re-establishing the practice-based doctoral project. At the same time, the review activity allowed the faculty to incorporate new ideas into the program design and to create program structures and formats that would replicate current experiences of educational leaders while protecting the most valuable assets of the initial program. The current debate about professional degrees in educational leadership reinforced the faculty's commitment to the professional doctorate as a practice-based program.

The Inclusion of Partnerships

Fullan stated: "If you remember one thing about information, it is that it only becomes valuable in a social context."[17] Accordingly, leadership development programs enhance students' abilities to value and use information in professional practice by embedding learning in social contexts. This approach requires students to engage with others– other students, professors, practicing leaders– in educational settings while experiencing multiple opportunities for reflection and feedback. As a result of working in partnership with others, students develop theories and explanations that answer the question, "What's going on here?" and identify practice implications and recommendations. Vygotsky's notion that students have a "zone of proximal develop" that limits what they can learn on their own compared to what they can learn from interactions with teachers and other learners also enhanced the theoretical framework that grounded the redesigned Ed.D. program.[18] The faculty was convinced that doctoral students would learn more and be able to apply what they learned more successfully if they learned in social contexts.

At SLU, learning occurs in partnerships. While those partnerships exist in formal as well as informal associations, SLU's program design team was intentional in creating partnerships for students at three levels: students with students; students with faculty member; and students with practicing leaders. These are described below.

Partnerships Between Students: Cohorts and Project Teams. Cohorts have existed in SLU's Ed.D. program for more than a decade. Since the cohort structure was created, the program has grown significantly. Cohorts, which consist of approximately 15 members, allow students to move through the program as a group with an opportunity to complete the program with their peers in three years, including two summers. Because students work in cohorts, they create supportive partnerships that enhance their work and encourage their success. Unlike many graduate programs in other disciplines that prepare professionals at the pre-service level, SLU's Ed.D. program serves primarily midcareer professional educators. Cohorts whose age and experiences are similar have stimulated student-to-student support while increasing the attributes of learning communities.

With regard to project teams, the initial Ed.D. program allowed students to complete their culmination projects while also engaged in coursework. However, research topics were selected early in the program and often were unrelated to the coursework or to their future leadership roles. The projects were research-based, and the reports followed the same five-chapter outline as the Ph.D. dissertation. The oral examination was conducted after the students successfully completed the coursework and the written comprehensive examination. After the project report was approved, it was submitted to the graduate school where it was handled in the same manner as a dissertation. This approach had little to do with the goals of the Ed.D. program and created a process in which students worked in isolation, unlike the experiences they would encounter after their graduation.

Although the new Ed.D. culminating activity is still labeled a project, it has little in common with the former requirement. The most important difference is that students are required to work in project teams of three to four to over the course of the three-year program. These teams create partnerships that facilitate group learning, decision-making, and problem-solving. The faculty assesses and evaluates the effectiveness of the teams' collaboration as well as the quality of individual contributions. Team partners select a topic that is related to current educational issues and follow one of three protocols: (1) Policy Analysis; (2) Problem-Based Learning; or (3) Product Development. Because teams work on their projects throughout their program, their projects enriched and informed by the coursework. Alternatively, team project activities often add meaning and depth to the coursework, especially during class discussions.

Partnerships Between Students and Faculty. The role of the advisor or mentor has changed with the new program design. The one-to-one relationship between a student and his or her advisor no longer exists. Each team is assigned one advisor, creating a partnership between team members and a single faculty member. In this partnership, the advisor walks a fine line between facilitator and evaluator. In the role of facilitator, the advisor asks challenging questions and provides clarity about expectations, work products, quality indicators, and resources. In the role of evaluator, the advisor assesses progress in the project and determines when the team members have successfully completed their work so that they can take their oral examination that signal the culmination of their Ed.D. program.

The faculty advisor is assigned to students after the team is formed and potential issues or topics are identified. An effort is made to match the faculty member to teams that have selected issues topics that are compatible with the faculty member's experience or expertise. The students' partnership with their advisor is reinforced through their participation in a one credit-hour course (12 contact hours) that is taught by the advisor to his or her advisees each of four semesters, beginning in the fall of the students' second year. The purpose of these courses is to discuss the teams' topics, report progress, address issues, and assess the progress of teams as well as each team member.

Before the team completes its team report and before each of the team members completes his or her individual report, the document that is used for the student's oral examination, an additional faculty member is assigned to work with the team as a partner to the advisor. This faculty member reviews the work and offers suggestions for improvements while assessing work quality with the team and the advisor. Because of the regularity of interactions between team members and their advisor, a collaborative culture is often created. This collaborative culture models good practice and can influence the associations that students have in their current positions or hope to create in new leadership positions.

Partnerships Between Students and Practicing Leaders. Project team members, in consultation with their advisors, develop Ed.D. projects that are field-based or field-focused. In field-based projects, students work in schools or districts using a problem-based learning format. Because the project is nested in a school district, many team members interact with the practicing leaders in that district. This interaction often creates a partnership in which knowledge is shared among the members and ideas are tested. In field-focused projects, project teams address issues that exist in the field, using a policy analysis or product development format. In these cases, partnerships are developed to pilot products, gather information, and test the validity of recommendations that result from their work. Whatever approach project teams choose, the process provides an experience that is both investigative and practical because of its association with practicing leaders.

Most Ed.D. students at SLU are practicing midlevel leaders who are seeking the expertise and credentials to secure a system-level position. As a consequence, team members are partnered with practicing leaders from other school districts. The nonacademic partnership that grows among these team members is valued, in part, because the students share similar concerns and support each others' career development. For example, on several occasions a team member has mentored another team member in a job search.

Educational Process Design

The SLU faculty is unified in its belief that designs for program processes should mirror the experiences that students face in school and district contexts. Practicing educational leaders do not work in isolation; rather, they are a part of a system that forces interdependence and cooperation. For example, the previous Ed.D. program, although a cohort-based program, still required independent work for the doctoral project. The faculty modified that design so that students would be required to work in teams. The concept of teaming is key to the program and is taught as part of the first semester curriculum. Larson's and LaFasto's classic text on team work is used where a team is defined as having two or more people, a specific performance objective or recognizable goal, and coordinated activity among team members to attain the team goal or objective.[19] This definition guides the team development processes used during the three years of the Ed.D. program and enhances the concept of partnership through its application to project activities.

Faculty Reflections: Initial Implementation

In order to formalize the practice of reflective practitioners and to model it for doctoral students, the chair of the Ed.D. program development committee and her graduate assistant designed an interview protocol for the eight faculty who were involved in the implementation of the redesigned Ed.D. program. The graduate assistant conducted the interviews and analyzed the data and then shared the findings with the faculty. All respondents participated in the program planning process as well as the ongoing development of program elements, such as course content, student team structure, advisor responsibilities, and culminating project criteria. A majority (seven) were advisors to Ed.D. student teams, and four taught at least one course in the new program. The interview protocol, based on a force field analysis design,[20] was used to uncover faculty perceptions of experiences that supported or limited the new program as well as general observations about the program. Four themes related to the partnership attributes of the program emerged from the data analysis: (1) project authenticity and relevance; (2) project rigor; (3) student enthusiasm; and (4) advisor shifts. The following results were taken from the assessment report.

Project Authenticity and Relevance

Frequently, faculty noted the importance of the team structure in reflecting the reality of school leadership. One faculty member captured this notion concisely:

> [The new project model] is a new way to look at a doctoral culminating activity that reflects the reality of practice. Our goal is to prepare practitioners whose careers are running schools. Their career is not focused on research. They work in teams to create change. They gather information and conduct research in teams. The reality of school leadership is not isolation.

In addition, faculty reported that as the year progressed and they began to work with teams as advisors they observed students negotiating project roles and developing project management skills within teams. One faculty member observed:

> Students are forced to analyze the results of their self-management and make changes based on that analysis.

In other words, not only were students working in teams, they also were developing the skills to do so effectively.

The notion of a team dynamic was repeatedly mentioned for its authenticity related to practice as well as its role in reinforcing the rigor of team projects. With regard to relevance and authenticity, faculty responses suggested that a concern about adequately preparing school leaders for their jobs was and continues to be the driving force for implementing SLU's redesigned Ed.D. program.

Project Rigor

The issue of project rigor emerged from the interviews as a driving force behind faculty involvement and participation in the ongoing development of the team project designs. Because Ed.D. projects deviated from the established rigor of the dissertation, several faculty members indicated that prior to implementation they, and some of their students, expressed concern that a "team project" may not be sufficiently "doctoral". However, nearly every faculty member interviewed indicated that the project structure had satisfied their concerns and, based on their observations of student teams, was as rigorous as that of a dissertation. Part of that rigor stemmed from the team structure because the partnerships increased accountability. One faculty member said:

> Teams talk about where they're going and come back together. They have to ask where do we want to go, where are we now, what does it mean? Students challenge each other's understanding.

Student Enthusiasm

Nearly every respondent expressed surprise at the high level of student enthusiasm for the new program. While at times there had been some ambiguity for students, as the clarity of the program design developed, they indicated a willingness to be a part of the innovation. Faculty members speculated that this willingness was due, in part, to an initial sense that working with others on a team project might be easier than a traditional dissertation. However, over time, students recognized the value of the projects to their development as a leader. Without this component, the partnerships would not have been successful.

Advisor Shifts

The final theme that emerged from faculty interviews pertained to shifts faculty had to make in their role as advisors. One interviewee stated:

> Advisors [of teams] need to be proactive rather than reactive. Faculty members need to establish a process with teams for getting the group going and setting benchmarks.

Another commented:

> It is not going to be easier for advisors. Being a team advisor is more like having a dialogue. We have to help students learn strategies to behave better as team members.

In short, the relationship between advisors and students was more collaborative.

Faculty members were learning to function in a different capacity as team advisors rather than advisors of traditional students. Most importantly, they had to learn to "look for team work." Because teams' partnership interactions were an essential aspect of the culminating project, team advisors were in the best position to assess the quality of that interaction. One faculty member cautioned:

> We need to identify measures to determine if teamwork is happening. Advisors must watch for and know what to look for in terms of teamwork.

These shifts in the advisor role became clearer at the end of the first year, but some faculty were still concerned that they were not well prepared to perform these new duties. As teams progress through their project work, and especially as the first cohort approaches the oral examinations, the capacity of the advisors to work with teams will be a pressing need.

Conclusion

This article presented a rationale for building partnerships into professional doctoral programs in educational leadership and a description of Saint Louis University's use of partnerships in its redesigned Ed.D. program. Although the program has been implemented, it continues to be a work in progress because of the underlying assumption that the faculty represent a learning community engaged in a problem-based learning project that focuses on the preparation of students for leadership roles in education. The current debate about the quality and scope of educational leadership preparation programs provides a rich context in which to do that work. The debate offers criticism as well as recommendations for improvement that influence the faculty discussions, program revisions, and accountability approaches that are essential to successful outcomes.

Currently, the faculty is engaged in a program review and has organized into small work teams to address three main areas: (1) accountability and quality assurance; (2) students' experiences from the beginning to the end of the program; and (3) faculty experiences and roles in the program. Fortunately, a collaborative culture exists within the department. The interview process used during the initial program assessment made clear how important this culture is. The analysis of interview data suggested that there was broad agreement among program faculty that the culture of the department contributed significantly to their willingness to both innovate and collaborate. Faculty members attributed this, in part, to the problem-based learning approach taken to develop the new Ed.D. program, and, in part, to the simple fact that "We like and respect each other." Several members cited the fact that the department is safe for risk-taking and for, what one interviewee called, "warm, positive confrontation." In this program, the collaborative and collegial culture has been a driving force for a program shift of this magnitude. This culture, based on partnerships among faculty members who have produced the new program, will support a continuous improvement effort to prepare effective and successful educational leaders.

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