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Preparing educational leaders to embrace the “public” in public schools

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239

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Abstract

Purpose – George Counts’ classic 1932 speech asks, “Dare the school build a new social order?” This article proposes examining whether emerging school leaders are prepared to face this challenge and embrace the society-building responsibility at the core of public schooling. It aims to focus especially on students from homogeneous backgrounds, their capacity to address issues of diversity, and the extent to which their educational leadership program has prepared them to champion social justice within schools.

Design/methodology/approach – This study looks at emerging leaders in three master’s level cohort programs in educational leadership at a state university in New England. It incorporates survey data, interviews, and document analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to organize and summarize the data. Open-ended questions and interviews were transcribed and coded, and program documents examined to identify overall purposes of educational leadership and evidence of diversity awareness.

Findings – Findings indicate these educational leaders are not adequately prepared to lead public schools toward a greater understanding of diversity or to help change the social order. They claim little responsibility for promoting social justice, especially when social change may challenge local norms. Responses indicate their perspective is not broad enough to understand fully the social responsibility Counts advocated.

Research limitations/implications – This study is limited to graduate students in New England, most of whom experience little diversity within their communities.

Practical implications – The study concludes with suggestions for educational leadership programs.

Originality/value – This study reveals the difficulties in preparing educational leaders to address the complexities of a diverse society – difficulties arising both from their limited personal experience and from voids in their educational leadership program.

Keywords Educational administration, Social justice, Equal opportunities, Leadership

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In his now-classic speech “Dare the school build a new social order?” George S. Counts (1932) challenged educators to use their power to create a new society, and thoughtful observers have long agreed that schools should indeed play such a role. Among America’s founding fathers, Washington and Jefferson spoke and wrote passionately about democracy’s need for an educated citizenry. Our form of government relies on a well-educated and thoughtful population, not only to guide its policies and directions, but to continue the evolution of society toward higher ideals. Building a new social order – as opposed to simply maintaining a status quo – is the essential work of democracy and of public schools.

American philosopher of education John Dewey (1916) argued that schools can and should be places where individual beliefs and world-views are honored as students come to understand the complexity not only of our own country but of a global society.



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The public Dewey envisioned goes far beyond the small neighborhoods in which many schools are situated and the like-minded thinking that may exist there. For Dewey, as for the nation's founders, education was viewed as the bedrock of equal opportunity and access to the benefits of democracy.

In "The moral responsibility of public schools" educator Walter Feinberg (1993) wrote that the purpose of public schools is to create a public, not simply reflect it. We contend that schools can live up to this lofty goal if they truly came to grips with the complex meaning of "diversity" in today's world, and if they came to embrace the word "public" in public schools. It would then be clear schools should become forums for exploring the complex choices their communities, states, and this nation face. In so doing, schools would not only be public, welcoming all views into the conversation – even when this is uncomfortable – they would be part of creating a public – providing an open and level playing field for wrestling with the question, "what is the common good?" This is just the opposite of being a private school or club, with a limited and defined culture and point-of-view characterizing its members. This is a true community – a *res publica* – where everyone may not agree, but everyone has a voice that moves the dialogue forward.

More than a half century after Counts spoke out, however, many would argue that most public schools continue to be timid sustainers of the status quo rather than bold agents of change for a better future. According to Marian Wright Edelman (1980, p. 1), for example, "Millions of black children were left behind when the progress begun in the 1960s leveled off or declined in the 1970s". Ronald Takaki (1993) believes that schools have perpetuated cultural divides in this country by holding up the mirror of history only to the experience of whites. And scholars such as Michael Apple (2000) and Joel Spring (2000) contend that public schools have consistently functioned to reflect and replicate society – and to advantage the dominant culture. Meanwhile, our society is far more complex and diverse than it was seventy years ago during George Counts's era. Schools are thrust into a position in which they must prepare children and communities for participation in a multicultural, multiethnic, multireligious, global society – where dramatically different world-views, values, and belief systems characterize our geographic and electronically accessible neighbors. As citizens of a complex nation and infinitely complex world, we have no choice but to gain broader perspectives and greater acceptance if we are to survive and prosper. Schools hold the key to our participation in this new world order.

If, as appears to be the case, America's public schools have not stepped up to this challenge, and if the need for them to do so is stronger than ever, where can we turn? The obvious answer is to school leaders – the principals and superintendents – whose importance in establishing the culture of schools is well documented (e.g. Barth, 2003; Deal and Peterson, 1999; Fullan, 2001; Sergiovanni, 2000). As the people responsible for setting the course and establishing the tone for schools, they are central to ensuring that schools effectively live up to their goal as truly "public" schools. In order to embrace the idea of "public", however, school leaders need a sophisticated understanding of this aspect of their role. As the protectors of dialogue and the advocates for education that advances all children, school leaders have the responsibility to pose challenging questions to their teachers, school boards, and students alike. While avoiding the appearance or the reality of using their schools to press a narrow agenda or special interest, they must promote a broad and deep

understanding of the principles of democracy and the fundamental human rights that protect everyone's opportunity to participate in the discussion, regardless of their backgrounds, beliefs, and viewpoints.

Although schools are not the only such forum, they are the place where many ideas of the next generation are formed. Regardless of a particular school's demographic mix, the existence of a multicultural/multilingual world should influence how school leaders act, what decisions they make, what the curriculum looks like, and what ideas are considered. School leaders, therefore, should no longer think of schools as places for education, but rather as places for public education. Building a culture that helps students and adults understand this crucial difference is a powerful way that schools can contribute to a new social order.

This is a tall order for school leaders. Yet it is ever more important that they recognize their responsibilities for meeting this larger societal charge. In order to prepare leaders to meet these responsibilities with skill and forethought, university graduate programs must recognize that they are in a key position. As such, educators who prepare school leaders must ask themselves how well they are preparing leaders to embrace their responsibility for creating a public. Some answers to this question can be found in the results of a study on graduate students in an Educational Leadership program at a state university in New England (Hoff and Yoder, 2002). Focusing especially on school leaders' ability to recognize and respond to diversity, the study explores attitudes that affect their readiness to assert leadership in an agenda for change that embraces the complexity of a diverse society.

The study is set in Maine, which was the terminus of the underground railway during slavery and has a history of great tolerance and progressive values. But like many rural areas across the country, it also appears quite homogeneous, particularly within the circle that is defined by neighborhood schools. Its population currently consists of about 1.5 percent officially recognized minorities (0.5 percent African-American, 0.5 percent Native American, and 0.5 percent "other"). Therefore, most Mainers (especially rural Mainers) have little day-to-day experience with racial minorities. On the other hand, change is in the wind. The city of Portland reports more than 40 different native languages now spoken in its schools as immigrants increasingly seek out Maine as a new destination. One notable example of this is the large influx of Somalis to Lewiston, which has been essentially a success story – one that illustrates again the significant change in Maine's demographic make-up[1]. Moreover, in a mobile and global society, the leaders of Maine schools will be preparing students who are likely to live their adult lives in more diverse settings. Clearly, Maine school leaders, and leaders like them who live in rather homogeneous communities, have a major responsibility to embrace a diversity agenda. The question is, are they equipped to do so?

The study: preparing educational leaders

One of the challenges facing educational leadership programs is how best to engage students in developing philosophies and practice for multicultural and diverse schools, extending student understanding beyond the experiences they have faced (or recognized) within their current school setting. To determine whether school leaders are prepared for this challenge, we looked at emerging leaders who were part of a master's level cohort program in educational leadership at a state university in New

England. To illuminate their sense of social responsibility, we looked at their positions on issues related specifically to diversity. Scholars and practitioners writing about educational leadership often elucidate complexities that educational leaders face in recognizing and responding to identity differences that exist within schools and the broader community (e.g. Borman and Baber, 1998; Capper, 1993; Grant, 2000; Leithwood, 1999; Lindsey *et al.*, 1999; Obidah, 2001; Weiss, 1993). Educational leadership preparation programs are important vehicles for helping school administrators understand such complexities, but the challenge of promoting diversity can be more daunting when the population of potential leaders and their own experiences are themselves quite homogeneous.

The educational leadership program examined in this study is a three-year master's program emphasizing personal reflection, situational analysis, and local practice. Students move through the program in cohorts, taking one or two courses at a time, working in collegial groups, examining personal values, investigating their local contexts, and practicing aspects of leadership craft in their home schools.

Students who participated in this study are emerging school administrators and teacher-leaders. The participant pool consisted of 90 students, divided almost evenly across three different cohorts. Students from the first cohort were in their first year of the program, students from the second cohort were in their last year of the program, and students in the third cohort were recently graduated. The surveys were mailed to participants, who returned them with no personally identifying information. We collected surveys from 58 students (64 percent), who remained anonymous, even to researchers. There was a nearly even balance of respondents among the three cohorts ($n = 17$, $n = 20$, and $n = 21$ respectively) and between women and men responding ($f = 31$, $m = 27$).

The survey addressed students' general perceptions of the importance of diversity to their practice as school leaders; their understanding of specific diversity topics; the extent to which the cohort program prepared them to recognize and respond to issues of diversity; their perception of risks in taking a stand in their communities; and the extent to which they understood leadership for social change. It contained primarily limited choice and scaled response questions on a four-point scale. Because this was exploratory data analysis, descriptive statistics were used to organize, summarize, and describe measures of the population. The gender, current occupation of respondents, and current year in cohort study were revealed on the survey, which allowed for comparisons by categories. The survey also contained open-ended questions, to which students responded in their own words using sentences or short paragraphs. Open-ended questions were transcribed and coded, first according to survey topics, and then across topics for emergent themes.

Nine students from within the survey population were also interviewed in depth – three from each cohort. Stratified random sampling procedures were used to select the individuals interviewed. Interview questions focused on examples or stories that students could offer that illustrated their positions on diversity issues, their practices, and the lessons learned about diversity in their cohort experiences. Students were also asked to talk specifically about their understanding of “multiple lenses”, “white privilege”, and “reflection”, terms that had also appeared in open-ended questions on the survey.

In analysis, we transcribed and then categorized students' interview responses according to the same major groups of questions asked in the survey: the importance of diversity issues in their practice; their understanding of specific diversity topics; whether or not they thought the program prepared them to respond to diversity issues; their perceptions of risk related to diversity issues in the communities; and whether or not they perceived the role of an educational leader as a vehicle for social change. Although several themes emerged from this analysis, two appeared in all categories and with greatest frequency:

- (1) a focus on local schools and communities; and
- (2) a concern for safety and comfort in both learning about leadership and in leadership practice.

We found no instances in which interview data contradicted the data from surveys. Rather, interviewees' examples supported and clarified positions described by the survey evidence.

Finally, we reviewed program documents (program descriptions, recruiting materials, and syllabi for all cohort courses) for public positions on the overall purposes of educational leadership and evidence of language around diversity. We also reviewed course reading lists for diversity-related assignments. An analysis of the data resulted in five findings, which were consistent across all sources and across all cohort groups.

Findings

Finding 1. Students in the study showed little understanding of specific concepts related to diversity, and although they were quite familiar with reflective practice, they focused their reflection on personal experiences in local contexts. We asked students whether or not their cohort experience familiarized them with particular concepts related to diversity, specifically white privilege and multiple lenses. Nearly 80 percent said they were either "not at all" familiar or had "very little" familiarity with the concept of white privilege. The concept of multiple lenses fared much better, with only 3 percent saying they were "not at all" familiar with that concept. However, their responses to an open-ended question about multiple lenses and their interview responses revealed that most students were using a very limited definition of the term. Rather than as a way to understand identity differences, students understood multiple lenses as a way to examine style differences, which was based on their study of Bolman and Deal's four frames of reference (symbolic, human resource, political, and structural frames) from reframing organizations (Bolman and Deal, 1997). No other examples of using multiple lenses or interpretations were given.

In response to questions about reflection, which is a pedagogical emphasis of their program, the students indicated they do look back at their own actions, but within a context of local norms and their own school experience. In all cases, reflection was personal and introspective, focusing on what "I did" or what "I believe" within their local context, rather than on larger systems issues. When diversity issues were raised, then, it was common for students to react with indifference, "this doesn't apply to my school"; disbelief, "all students are treated the same these days"; or even hostility, "I'm tired of hearing about this – my life is not easy, either." Thus, although reflective

practice is essential for good leadership, it was evident that simply asking current and potential school leaders to hold a mirror on themselves is not enough.

Finding 2. *These Educational Leadership students believe that diversity issues are important – but less important in their local schools and their New England region than in the rest of the nation.* When asked whether diversity issues were important for schools, 81 percent responded that this was very important for schools elsewhere across the nation, 60 percent said it was important for the region, but only 45 percent said it was important for their own school. Interviews and document analysis supported the survey results. Asked about diversity in his professional setting, for example, one student commented that he had very little experience with diversity in general and no racial diversity “... but we’re talking about Maine and we’re hoping to be leaders of Maine schools, so this is not a pressing topic.” A review of cohort course syllabi revealed that the curriculum does not address the many diversity issues across schools in the state (e.g. racially motivated violence in a local high school, protests over Native American mascot symbols, only 17 percent of superintendents being female) which have an impact on the quality of life and learning in Maine.

This finding suggests that leadership programs focused on students’ immediate situations may contribute to their being out of touch with the conditions that exist in the broader region and across the nation. An unintended consequence of making learning reality-based and immediately applicable is that students may be reflecting only on their own leadership skills in their current school settings. This narrow reflection has the potential to reinforce students’ tendency both to think and act locally, without challenging them to question the broader assumptions upon which their actions are based or take the lead on broadening their community’s understanding of the diversity all around them.

Finding 3. *Although they were positive about their leadership program in general, students think their program prepared them only “somewhat” for addressing issues of diversity in their local communities and geographical region, and even less well for work in other more diverse parts of the nation.* Students in the Educational Leadership program reported that they felt at least “somewhat” prepared to deal with diversity in educational environments in Maine, but nearly half felt they are prepared “very little” to deal with diversity issues in other parts of the nation. One student interviewed noted that, while she felt well prepared for her principalship in rural Maine near where she grew up, she also has read advertisements in *Education Week* and did not feel prepared to apply for jobs she sees nationally. She said about working in Chicago, for instance, “I couldn’t do that.”

It is evident that as long as students define the circle of their school community quite narrowly, they remain comfortable with their beliefs and their leadership. When the circle is widened to include a larger area with a more diverse population, however, their knowledge and comfort level drops. This suggests that students can function in their relatively homogeneous local schools and communities without giving diversity a high priority (while at the same time recognizing they would not fit well in more diverse schools and communities). It also points to the need for educational leadership programs that encourage students to recognize the diversity issues that exist in their current schools, that prepare them for changing demographics that are sure to come, that equip them to take the lead in broadening community norms, and that help them

be the kind of leaders who will better prepare children for the world they will face as adults.

Finding 4. *Students felt safe and comfortable addressing issues of diversity in cohort classes, but were much less safe or comfortable doing so within their own communities.* Nearly 60 percent of the students in the study felt a cohort class was a safe place to raise and discuss issues of diversity. One student noted, for example, that the norms for classroom participation which students set for themselves helped him feel free to participate, no matter what was under discussion. Many noted class norms for listening, participating, and supporting as contributing to an environment of openness. However, exactly the same percentage believed it would be very risky to raise these issues within their school community. When asked whether various types of identity difference would be more risky to raise than others, students ranked issues of sexual orientation highest, followed by issues of race, gender, and religion (in that order). Of less risk was raising issues related to socio-economic status.

We also asked about the position they would take if their own values conflicted with the norms of the community. Whereas 64 percent said they would like to stand up for their own values, some added comments, such as, "But then I would start looking for another job!" One person who checked that she would support community values wrote, "That is not what I'd want to do, but I don't feel I really have any other option."

It is evident that feeling safe and able to take risks in a cohort environment is very different from feeling safe in their work environment. A question raised by this evidence, then, is whether the safety of cohorts, and a pedagogy based on situational leadership, can give students, particularly those who come from very homogeneous communities, the skills, confidence, and commitment needed for leadership with a global perspective.

Finding 5. *We found little evidence that students in the study see an educational leader's work in a national or global perspective; we found little evidence that students see the practice of educational leadership as a responsibility for social change.* None of the data-gathering techniques surfaced evidence that students see the role of educational leaders as related to fostering social responsibility/justice. When we asked students why educational leaders need to attend to issues of diversity, the most frequent response was that it helped leaders make better decisions, with the concept of "fairness" frequently emerging. Leadership students may seek to treat all children fairly, but their responses indicated that what they mean is treating all children similarly. Without knowledge of a broader context, educational leadership students may not feel compelled to look deeper and examine whether their "fair" treatment of individuals might result in disparate impact among some groups. Unfortunately, then, this "fair treatment" gives school leaders an opportunity, to be "off the hook" from the extra work it takes to confront patterns of discrimination.

Students also did not report that challenging local norms or working for social reform is part of their responsibility as educational leaders. In fact, rather than taking uncomfortable or even risky positions in their schools, these educational leaders expressed a need to "fit in" to their local communities. As one school principal explained, "I was hired by the community to do what the community wants me to do, not to rock the boat." This viewpoint, we would argue, is unlikely to give students the perspective needed to examine whether their actions are perpetuating long-standing patterns of injustice.

Summary finding

In light of all five findings, then, we must conclude that these educational leaders are not well-prepared to lead public schools toward a greater understanding of diversity or to help change the social order. They see themselves as local community members more than as public servants, serving local interests more than national or global ones. They claim little responsibility for promoting social justice, especially when a social change may challenge local norms. The responses indicate that their perspective is not broad enough to understand fully the social responsibility that George Counts believed should accompany their role.

And their responses may not be atypical. Across the country, many students come to leadership preparation with a perspective focused on the "the school I work in now", which often represents a rather homogeneous, neighborhood view of education. When this coincides with an educational leadership program that does not regularly challenge their core beliefs about education and society (both theoretically and in practice), the result can be students who have gained neither the understanding to be the leaders of social change, nor the skills to do so. If students are not pushed well outside their comfort level, it is unlikely they will become educational leaders who contribute to building a new social order through public schools.

Preparing school leaders to think globally and act courageously

There is no question that helping educational leadership students become self-analytical and reflect upon the areas where their own leadership and decisions can be improved is an important aspect of self and school improvement. If, however, an educational leadership program fails to push students to reflect beyond their individual actions and their current setting, it can actually reinforce their tendency both to think and act locally. This confines their actions to the norms of their local schools and communities, which can only result in the maintenance of the status quo. More problematic, local thinking can mask deep prejudice that exists to sustain a system that advantages the dominant culture. School leaders who hesitate to challenge local norms may perpetuate a system of schooling that marginalizes people who are considered different. As Counts reminds us, all education includes the imposition of ideas and values, but educators have an obligation to be clear about what assumptions shape their practice. A narrow focus on local concerns may involve "the clothing of one's own deepest prejudices in the garb of universal truth" (Counts, 1932, p. 180).

There is an alternative. Educational leaders have to decide in big and small ways every day whether to let local or global contexts shape their actions. School leaders who go out of their way to welcome immigrant students, hire openly gay teachers, support a multi-cultural curriculum, honor a variety of religious holidays, and routinely examine school practices that might reinforce privilege (to list just a few examples), perhaps even in the face of local disapproval, contribute to the important task of creating an arena for expanding local and parochial *weltanschauungen*. Exemplary acts by school leaders speak even louder than exemplary words. They send messages about the inclusiveness of the schools' social and intellectual environments. They quite literally set up a level playing field for the arena of ideas and beliefs. This is an arena from which a new social order can emerge.

The challenge for educational leadership programs, then, is to develop in potential leaders a passion for public concerns. Their studies should extend their vision beyond

their own schools, help them recognize that their positions carry broader public responsibilities, and enable them to face difficult issues and take risks. Growing from what we learned in our study, we propose four specific tasks for educational leadership programs. First, programs should provide opportunities for field experience in educational settings beyond students' familiarity. This will broaden their perspectives and can be done through student exchanges or partnerships with schools and universities in more diverse settings (perhaps using winter or May terms or via technology links).

Second, we suggest an emphasis on true critical reflection, where students' reflective views are purposefully widened and angled. This would require expanding the curriculum beyond a few selected readings related to diversity. Hess and Kelly (2005), who collected course syllabi from 56 principal preparation programs across the country (210 syllabi), found striking similarities in core readings, which relied most heavily on work by Terence Deal, Allan Odden, Kent Peterson, Michael Fullan, Lee Bolman, and Thomas Sergiovanni. We suggest the infusion of authors (among many others) Joel Spring, Catherine Marshall, James Banks, Sonia Nieto, Margaret Grogan, Michael Dantley, Michael Apple, Allan Johnson, and Paula Rothenberg.

Third, we recognize the importance for more of us in educational leadership to engage in research focused on what works to connect the local to the global. A primary objective should be identifying best practices that improve education for all students and modeling the quest for these practices. Finally, and most important, we endorse a fundamental shift toward critical pedagogy and a commitment to leadership for social justice.

This country needs educational leadership preparation programs that give students theoretical grounding in the social responsibilities of leadership and provide opportunities for students to practice the skills they will need to act in the face of change or conflict. Then, when local preferences conflict with national or global concerns – a concern such as social justice for diverse populations – an educational leader will be prepared to take a controversial or even unpopular stand to say, "This is a public school, and therefore this is the concept of justice we stand for." In other words, the leader will be prepared to embrace the "public" in public schools and have the theoretical and interpersonal skill to facilitate difficult discussions within a community.

Public educational leaders can be agents of social change. They can promote social justice. But a new social order? Yes, at least in a qualified sense. School leaders who protect the public nature of public schools contribute to creating the social order our nation has been claiming since its inception – a nation of diverse people committed to the common good.

Note

1. In brief, over 1,000 Somalis, encouraged by social service references and word-of-mouth, relocated to Lewiston, Maine between 2000 and 2003. Overwhelmed by the pressure this in-migration placed on the city's social services, Mayor Larry Raymond of Lewiston issued an open letter to Somali leaders (October 3, 2002) asking them not to continue moving to Lewiston. This letter made national news and provoked much opposition (and some support) for his stance nationally and locally. The "National Alliance", a white-supremacist group, attempted to use the incident to elicit race-based demonstrations against the Somalis in Lewiston. A large number of citizens, however, rallied in support of the Somalis October 14,

2002. Matt Hale, leader of the World Church of the Creator, also attempted to provoke anti-Somali sentiment in Lewiston. Hale's arrest in Chicago on the charge of murder solicitation (of a federal judge) prevented him from attending a second pro-diversity rally in Lewiston January 11, 2003, where approximately 4,500 marchers evidenced Mainers' support for the Somalis. See, for example, *Portland Press Herald* (2002, p. 1A); and *Portland Press Herald* (2003, p. 1A).

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