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## Recognizing each other's faces in educational leadership's scholarship and practice

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The persisting tension over the relative importance of theory and practice creates a crevasse between scholars and practitioners. The purpose here is to problematize divisions between cultural norms found among scholars and practitioners.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Both authors, higher education scholars, experienced temporary assignments as public school leaders and reflect on their experiences moving back and forth between school leadership practice and academia. This qualitative and autobiographical work draws on a combination of hermeneutics in the dominant educational leadership literature and the co-authors' experiences recorded in journals, saved memos and other school data records. These data sets and continuing access to their professional and scholarly colleagues provided the basis for analyses.

**Findings** – Draws on three main points: curricular balance; faculty composition; and research, and, while it strongly encourages faculty to seek ways to connect or reconnect with the field, opines that, if the field's curriculum for development and preparation with research is balanced, then faculty will connect with practice.

**Originality/value** – Research carried out in the program is of high quality, driven by practice, and useful to practitioners and/or policy makers.

**Keywords** Case studies, Academic staff, Professional associations

**Paper type** Literature review

### Introduction

Professional culture is a recurring topic of interest to education scholars, but many practitioners eschew what seems like non-productive and irrelevant academic musings from those in the ivory tower (Sykes, 1999). This paper represents an effort by two scholar-practitioners to expose the dividing norms between educational leadership practitioners and scholars. The purpose of this paper is to name the sources of divisions and in so doing to allow opportunities for reconciling or celebrating these persisting differences. An applied field needs to ease the passage of scholars and practitioners between the worlds of work and study of that work. The interdependence of scholarship and practice requires deeper understanding of the forces that separate these two contributing perspectives in the field of educational leaders.

The divisions have been part of the discussions about the goals and purpose of preparation of school administrators since the beginning. Levine (2005, p. 15) described "sharp differences – which became fissures. . . James Earl Russell, dean of Teachers



College, favored a practitioner-based program". Other deans, for example at Harvard and University of Chicago, pushed for more rigorous academic models. "The education school deans agreed to disagree, thus laying the foundation for what has evolved into polar differences regarding the goals and purposes of educational administration programs" (Levine, 2005, p. 16).

In response to the Broad Foundation and Thomas B. Fordham Institute's recent report *Better Leaders for America's Schools: A Manifesto*, Kowalski (2004) notes that a group of what he refers to as anti-professionist are currently raising the stakes in that they seek to deregulate school administration, "This war for the soul of school administration has and continues to be centered on intractable conflict concerning tensions between democracy and professionalism in school governance" (Kowalski, 2004, p. 92). While this paper will not directly deal with this attack, what some are considering a crisis in the field, it does offer some direction for those who believe that education can and should strengthen the professional aspect of administration.

### Perspectives

Teaching is one of several occupations, including the military, by which people can improve their social status (Lortie, 1975). As a result, members of any social strata may view educators' social status as pretentious. The dogged self-determinism of US cultural values allow anti-intellectualism to simmer socially and cast more shadows over the esteem by which teachers are regarded (Boyer, 1990; Elazar, 1994).

The field of educational leadership assumes a traditionally defensive stance in relation to the field's stature in society as well as in the academy (McCarthy and Kuh, 1997; McCarthy *et al.*, 1988). This posture stimulated the drive for a scholarly foundation in the studies of educational leadership (Boyer, 1990; Clifford and Guthrie, 1988; Tyack and Hansot, 1982).

Pounder (2004, p. 511) imply that professors have moved further over the decades toward a scholarly approach valuing the importance of ideas and extending knowledge. In a survey of recent doctoral graduates, they found overall perceptions of the university professoriate were that "those job attribute items that were viewed most negatively included largely salary and working conditions items (objective domain). For example, 'pressure to publish' was evaluated least favorable of all 57 items". However, for the sub-group of graduates that went into the professorate they found "Interestingly 'publication/work pressure' was positively related to intention to remain a professor, suggesting that perhaps those respondents who have already chosen to be educational leadership professors do not experience publication/work pressure as necessarily disadvantageous to staying in the professorate" (Pounder *et al.*, 2004, p. 523). Even among recent graduates from doctoral programs there seems to be some stark differences in dispositions between practitioners and professors.

The underlying viewpoint assumed in this paper is a critical perspective, one that questions the prevailing conditions and assumptions of a social system, class, or group (English, 1992, 1994; Greenfield, 1982, 1985; Foster, 1986). Educational leadership studies have been called to task for either taking a more critical perspective or

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conversely not taking a critical enough perspective (Culbertson, 1988; Donmoyer, 1999a,b; Griffiths, 1988; López, 2003; Lugg, 2003).

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### **Data sources and methods**

Although this article's prevailing perspective, critical theory, typically adopts analytic approaches depending on deconstructing language and vocabulary in extant works, this work reports on a combination of hermeneutics in the dominant educational leadership literature and the co-authors' experiences. Both authors, established scholars in higher education, experienced temporary assignments as public school leaders in two states. While both had practiced as school leaders before entering higher education, their experiences venturing back into the field and then returning to the academy are rare, though not unique (Cunningham, 1969; Donmoyer, 1995; Stuart, 1967). Both recorded their experiences in journals, saved memos and other school data records, and since re-entering their professorial positions maintain relationships with the public schools that they temporarily served. These extensive data sets as well as continuing access to their professional and scholarly colleagues provided the basis for analyses presented.

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The authors reviewed journal entries and post-field experiences to reveal vignettes of problematic postures between scholars and practitioners. The findings expose the unhelpful divisions in the applied field of educational leadership. Although space limits full replication of vignettes here, the following provides an example and summarizes findings. Then the authors provide personal reflections on how their movement between both worlds increased their capacity as scholar-practitioners.

### **Practitioner vignette**

The setting is a professional development session with university professors giving information about two topics (teacher selection and a teaching model designed to foster reading skills – Concept attainment; see Lasley and Matczynski, 1997). For this professor, this was a real change because I was now part of the practitioners not on the other side. It felt good to be part of a group of principals that I respected and had worked with in a different role; for the most part, from the reactions of the principals it seemed I was accepted as a peer in the group. It was July 25 and I was already well into hiring three positions for the next year, in which it was arranged for me to be on sabbatical from a university in southern Ohio and working as the high school principal at a nearby school district. While I did not find everything covered in this professional development session to be earth shattering I did find a few good ideas that I thought, "I may use that some day."

What struck me about this meeting occurred in an informal feedback session with the whole group. I was commenting on something and made the statement that I was looking forward to the year and the fun I was expecting to have as a principal. There was an interesting reaction from one of the veteran members of the group (in fact a few weeks earlier, on June 5, I had spent an hour visiting at her school getting her advice on what I might look for as a rookie principal – she was one of two people I sought out during this time period). She laughed boisterously and made a comment to the effect that I was in for a surprise, implying *naïveté* on my part. At the time I was a little offended, but thought as someone who has only been a professor and an assistant



principal (and that was 18 years earlier) it would not be appropriate to react. So all I said was, "Well, I do think it will be fun." The two years I spent were hard and I learned a lot, but they were also full of fun for me and the people I worked with at the high school. That comment and many others like it continue to be made to me about how many professors would not survive the rigors of the principalship. These types of comments indicate how some professors are viewed as being out of touch with reality. The lack of relevance is a major problem for the profession and provides support to those who would like to see the demise of university preparation programs.

*What practitioners say about scholars*

Practitioners are bombarded by demands from many directions and constituents (e.g. parents, community members, politicians, businesses, students, teachers, unions, board members, and universities to name a few). Just one example is the licensure requirements of each state and the federal legislation that demands teachers meet politicians' definition of highly qualified teachers. Pressure for accountability has increased and it seems as if time has become a luxury seldom available to practitioners.

When university professors say that they should not have to prepare administrators to manage the daily problems of practice in the systems for which school leaders are responsible, those scholars seem to be out of touch with the world in which schools operate. Theory for its own sake does not have much value. What schools need are ways to help real live students now. Crisis after crisis represent pressing demands that make scholars' emphases on reflection and ivory tower-ish theory seem too abstract or like arguments about how many angels can fit on the head of pin. At best, scholars are out of touch; at worst, they are a drain on vital resources and time that needs to be spent helping children.

In a discussion of the problems that practitioners have with university programs, Stein and Gewirtzman (2003, p. 4) state: "University incentive structures do not encourage or require participation in school leadership practice on the part of professors. Faculty members are typically hired based on their record of publication, not on their . . . school-based leadership." They further posit, "At best, the process of generating new knowledge is rigorous, systemic, and slow. By the time a research finding is published, the empirical world of practice has moved on, confronting new challenges and new realities" (Stein and Gewirtzman, 2003, p. 4):

The idea that "professors are parasites", which develops from the feeling among many practitioners that researchers arrive at schools, take data out, contribute very little in return, and write articles that earn them prestige in the research community when their name becomes associated with the exemplary practice of school-based practitioners schools (since the "research subjects" must typically remain anonymous), must be challenged (Stein and Gewirtzman, 2003, p. 8).

In the conclusion of Levine's critique of school leadership programs, Levine states: "Because they have failed to embrace practice and practitioners, their [the leadership programs'] standing has fallen, and school systems have created their own leadership programs" (Levine, 2005, p. 68).

### Scholar-practitioner vignette

The setting is an international peer-refereed scholarly conference where few practitioners venture. Many of those that do grace the sessions appear due to pressure from their professors and advisors as they seek terminal degrees. In public spaces, they offer positive, even approval-seeking, comments such as, "I've read about these people and now I get to see them." Or, "I'm a bit overwhelmed by all the brain power here." In the few moments they grab with the scholars, they sometimes confess that the conference is different from their experiences with professional conferences. For one thing, the exhibit hall offers few free samples. In short, the Kudzu of academe drapes every aspect of scholarly conferences.

During my tenure in the field, re-tooling as a middle school principal, I went to both professional and scholarly conferences. Not surprisingly, I felt at home in both, until one post-session conversation with several colleagues, among which exist respected researchers on the roles and politics associated with positions in school leadership. My colleagues began comparing notes related to the policy environment for their programs in school leadership from state regulations to accreditation requirements. Naturally, the topic of current pressure for alternative career paths to the principalship and superintendency arose. One of my colleagues noted the irony in a local press for alternative certification that had played out in a state regulation and accreditation requirements for professors of educational leadership to possess some form of practitioner license. The perversity of policy that eschews a core prerequisite for school leadership as teaching experience, but insists that professors of educational leadership possess such credentials provoked both laughter and concern.

The conversation turned as colleagues compared notes on their practitioner backgrounds, and I remarked on "retooling" in the field after 14 years in academe. One of those present shocked me with this outburst, "Why on earth would you do that?" It turned out that the outburst was a rhetorical question as this well respected scholar began to list a variety of reasons why time in leadership roles in the field was a worthless and wasteful use of time. The following is an example of the reasons provided by practitioners:

- Research is the focus of full professors and principals do not have time to research anything.
- The petty logistics of school days provide no insights into the principal position that can't be gathered in rigorously designed surveys or other studies.
- Full professors represent a level of scholarship that requires no further credentials.
- The public and policy makers need no other evidence of professorial productivity than that which academic freedom protects through the process of promotion and tenure.
- It doesn't take a cook to recognize the quality of the food.
- My brain was probably soft to start.

Obviously, I have thought about this incident. In comparison to the numerous vignettes that I could recite about how practitioners reacted to my "retooling" in the field, I think both sectors suspected that I suffered some kind of brain malfunction.

Ultimately, the scholar to practitioner message carries the edge of intellectual elitism that inappropriately privileges one perspective as well as violates some of the basic scholarly tenets of knowledge construction in any field.

*What scholars say about practitioners*

Scholars seem constantly affronted by practitioners' demand for expediency and convenience in addressing the daily problems of practice. Kowalski (2005, p. 6) provides two positive purposes for the use of practitioners as part-time faculty; that of increasing clinical education and making instruction more practice-based; yet, he notes that "the deployment of part-time faculty has been used to erode full-time positions and when this occurs, school administration departments are even more likely to become 'cash cows'". Although many institutions employ an underground staff of adjuncts whose day jobs include every category of school and district professional positions, full time tenure-track faculty distance themselves from those worker bees in numerous ways (Schneider, 2003; Shakeshaft, 2002).

Practitioners are anti-intellectual. Such anti-intellectualism borders on malpractice. They may be limited in their ability to solve problems because of parochial viewpoints. Practitioners are uncritical about the status quo and often perpetuate poor and abusive practices (Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002; Blase and Blase, 2002, 2003).

Practitioners, who are unethical with ideas, may be unethical in other aspects of practice. Practitioners are apt to steal educational practices from the internet. In addition, their propensity for a quick answer to complex problems may cause harm. Many internet web sites on education represent political or even entrepreneurial positions rather than tested and appropriate educational practices. Practitioners' indiscriminant acceptance of these site's recommendations may exacerbate individual student, school, and community issues.

**Reflections**

The knowledge for educational leadership cannot be incubated in a sanitized library. As an applied field, educational leadership offers the most opportunities for scholars and practitioners to collaborate in knowledge production. Arguably, the realms of practices and scholarship must intersect along at least three vectors:

- (1) the deepening of relevant research agenda for the field;
- (2) the refinement of preparation and development for practitioners; and
- (3) a united front and informed guidance of policies directed at education in general.

*Improving and refreshing a research agenda*

Educational leadership scholars need excursions into the field to refine their research agenda and test their assumptions about the saliency of their scholarship (e.g. Walcott, 1973). Without a field-based understanding of the pressing problems of practice, scholars are irrelevant to both practitioners and other scholars. Levine (2005, p. 44) states: "Educational administration scholarship is atheoretical and immature; it neglects to ask important questions; it is overwhelmingly engaged in non-empirical research; and it is disconnected from practice." There are many ways that professors



can connect and reconnect with the real world of practice. Practitioners need to accept and work with those in the university that are willing to make these efforts.

Some have called for more accessibility of research to practitioners as well as the involvement of practitioners in the development of research (Creighton *et al.*, 2005, p. 2). They state: "One of the great ironies of the culture of educational administration in higher education is the exclusion of practicing school leaders in the development of and the access to the knowledge base (KB) of the field." This can happen as Willower (1994, p. 467) pointed out one superintendent, "W.T. Harris, one of the earliest writers in the field, was, after all, a Hegelian scholar and long-time editor of the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, as well as an educational administrator". Harris may have been exceptional, but the profession does need to access the practitioners' perspective. Kowalski and Place (1998, p. 40) raise some questions about research standards that may be relevant to finding a balance:

- Which research standards best serve society and schools?
- Which research standards best serve the needs of practitioners?
- Which research standards best serve the profession?
- Which standards are most apt to guide practitioner-scholars toward using research to solve problems in daily practice?
- Which standards will be accepted by university cultures?

While spending time in the field helps to gain perspective on these issues, not all professors will be taking time to reconnect. Therefore, it is increasingly important that university researchers ask these types of questions of their own and others work.

#### *Aligning professional curricula*

Practitioners need the safety of the university to hone their skills in problem identification and analysis. Learning to think quickly requires time and space to practice incisive and acute data collection to reach reliable conclusions. We need to develop space where practitioners can work on relevant issues and develop skills that are better developed in the safer environment of academia vs. the high stakes world of their practice. For example, if students work on a selection project in a personnel class they could improve their decision making by taking time to apply theory and make their assumptions explicit with out actually hiring some one that they and the students will have to live with for an extended time.

Scholars need the field to test curriculum as well as problem finding and problem resolution strategies. Universities need to do more, but have started to make some of efforts to make programs and experiences inviting and relevant to real world issues. Milstein and Krueger (1993, p. 19) note "many universities have begun to experiment with ways of shifting the balance of preparation towards more focus on clinical activities and to explore methods for enriching the activities and learning that take place during the clinical experience". Shakeshaft (1993, p. 216) describes one program that made "an effort to move the program out of the classroom and to emphasize experiential learning, we have linked each new community of students that we admit with a local school district".

These efforts need to include a balance and not lose the advantages that reflection and connecting with scholarship can provide. Levine (2005, p. 36) laments the problem of "The adjunct professoriate consisted largely of local superintendents and principals. Their dominant mode of instruction was the telling of personal anecdotes about their adventures as administrators".

*United we stand – in the present volatile educational environment practitioners and scholars need to work together not against each other*

The political realities are making the world an uncertain place for educators. This uncertainty comes in the form of funding. Perhaps, more importantly, in terms of legislative demands placed on the field (e.g. in terms of teacher or administrator licensure requirements or in terms of accountability requirements, or as Levine (2005, p. 49) points out "programs are being bypassed as states approve alternative routes and waive traditional certification requirements for principals and superintendents").

Scholars and practitioners need to respect each other at a basic level or our differences may cause those outside education to push for and attain cuts in funding or increased governmental restrictions at both the university and P-12 levels of schools. The public image of the field is under attack from segments of society, other professions, and governmental forces and if we attack each other that provides great momentum to those who would trivialize or de-professionalize education. In a discussion of the different perspectives on research and reform, Ferrero (2005, p. 427) makes a comment that is relevant to this discussion "if educators and reformers could become more self aware and more articulate about their values and their philosophical underpinnings, they could defuse tensions among themselves and channel those values more productively". Levine (2005, p. 56) suggests that a good model is available in England where the recently opened National College for School Leadership (NCSL) is attempting to "bind together research and practice, believing that research should drive practice and practice should fuel research".

### Conclusion

There are three points from Levine's "nine-point template for judging the quality of school leadership programs" (Levin, 2005, p. 12) that deal with the needed practitioner scholar balance. Specifically, "3. Curricular balance: The curriculum integrates the theory and practice of administration. . . . 4. Faculty composition: the faculty includes academics and practitioners, ideally the same individuals. . . . 7. Research: Research carried out in the program is of high quality, driven by practice, and useful to practitioners and/ or policy makers" (Levine, 2005, p. 13). In this paper, we have dealt with curriculum and research directly, and while we strongly encourage faculty to seek ways to connect or reconnect with the field, it is our contention that if we really balance the field's curriculum for development and preparation with research, then faculty will connect with practice.

Just as emerging research shows that schoolyard fights result from status-seeking individuals who can be simultaneously bully and victim, the divisions between scholars and practitioners in educational leadership may be symptomatic of a dysfunctional caste-seeking system. Scholars and practitioners in an applied field need to promote their duality and interdependence.



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