The Kentucky Education Reform Act and a renovation and renewal of results through an innovative educational leader preparation program designed to focus on social justice and learning gaps: A Doctor of Philosophy program that works

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Poverty often deprives a man of all spirit and virtue;
It is hard for an empty bag to stand upright
-Benjamin Franklin

The Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) was passed in 1990. At that time KERA had the distinction of launching the most aggressive and broad based change initiative of any reform bill in the United States (University of Kentucky, 2008). The results of such action, 20 years later, continue to challenge the notions of educational equity, organizational designs and leadership training that is lock-step with the reallocation of authority and revamped testing.

One year later, in 1991, the Kentucky Office of Education Accountability Report emphatically addressed the intentions of reform. “The children of the poor and the children of the rich, the children who live in the poor district and the children who live in the rich district must be given the same opportunity and access to an adequate education” (OEA, December 1991:1) Interestingly, a study of Kentucky’s accountability test scores (KIRIS and CATS), national test scores (ACT, NAEP), and other standards of measure (drop-out rates, graduation rates, college attendance and so on) show that KERA has not produced its desired results (Clark, 2007).

Sweeping curriculum and accountability reforms were designed to provide an equal platform of achievement for all children. Unfortunately, even with the interesting manipulation of data, the achievement gap between the poor and the wealthy continues to increase. Furthermore, even with a financial reform package attached to KERA that was innovative and very productive in equalizing funding, the gap of poverty continues to hamper an educational focus on social justice and a closure of the learning gap (Roeder, 2008).

While the purpose of this conversation is not on the specific data that were generated with respect to achievement gaps and alternate indicators of academic achievement, it is the purpose of this work to provide a footprint for training educational leaders to overcome the “culture” of poverty and begin to supplant hope for hopelessness. This urgent mandate is based on the results and reality of KERA’s twentieth birthday; inasmuch, we must train a new generation of leaders to deal with social problems that are significant and ever-present.
The challenge of today’s mind is to create a new knowledge base for education while imprisoned in today’s mind.
-S. Oborn

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has identified, through the Carnegie Foundation and the Council of Academic Deans in Research Education, a framework for transforming the education doctorate into the degree of choice for the next generation of school and college leaders (Carnegie Foundation, 2009). The impact of change, at least in a transformative sense, must exist in a laboratory of practice in which future practitioners experiment and undertake “best evidence analyses.” (Carnegie Foundation, 2009).

Universities must change their culture of exclusivity. Similarly, public school personnel must believe they can produce knowledge as well. This change in vision is one of the first requirements for an effective Ph.D. program designed to improve leadership in schools of poverty. This change, however, is not easy. And in many cases organizations are not even designed for such laboratory work and collaborative investments. The resultant research from such a marriage will be the blueprint for a new and innovative school that will provide access for all children to an equal and challenging educational experience.

Contextual research must be the foundation and benchmark for all change as it applies to poverty and education. Practitioners skilled in change are appreciative of its semi-unpredictable and volatile character, yet they are concerned with the pursuit of ideas and competencies that would accomplish a desired set of ends (Fullan, 1994). Fullan believes there are four core components to building greater change capacity: personal vision-building, inquiry, mastery and collaboration.

Prioritizing inquiry is a vital core component of change. While Fullan would argue that inquiry is only one of the four core capacities, the need for practitioners to develop the ability to conduct research is critical. This process of inquiry must be embedded in a laboratory undergirded by the notion of teamwork, cohort study and research-based innovations. If a Doctor of Philosophy program is to provide a deep learning and mentoring construct then students must investigate and develop research based theory that can transcend obstacles and instigate change.

Since change is not linear, and is in need of constant inquiry, it is important to note that the total time frame for any change, from initiation to institutionalization, is lengthy. Even moderately complex change takes from three to five years (Fullan, 1991). Therefore, the scholarship of teaching and leading must be a fundamental part of the Doctor of Philosophy as well. Successful schools built on the grounds of poverty are in need of a leader that can excite vision, instill hope and provide educational opportunities that transcend their culture of hopelessness. However, while the
individual is clearly a key player in the game of educational change, the organization is also important (Oborn, 1996).

Learning organizations themselves may be a form of leverage on the complex system of human endeavors (Senge, 1990). Ultimately, all research that deals with educational change will have an impact upon the organization known as school. Isolationism does not foster creative ideas, and oftentimes the only way to break the trance of mediocritiy is to awaken to a new idea or follow a new competitor (Senge, 1990). Schools of poverty exist in a very narrow and isolated tent of hopelessness and failure. Fueled by an economy and society that has not been able to educate all children equally, and bathed in the reality their future will clearly be a repeat of their ancestors, learning organizations grown in poverty must now provide laboratories for success.

Since change has been linked to a paradigm shift and a collaborative effort of design and methodology then the ability to create the new also has to be built into the organization (Drucker, 1993). Instructional leadership is the fundamental vehicle for the transformation of teaching and learning. The Doctor of Philosophy must provide paths of study that develop a scholarship of teaching and “signature leadership traits” to guide work. This directed application of practice and research should engage in extensive fieldwork designed to change and provide alternative ideas of discourse and instructional protocols that will render “neutral” the devastating and delimitative effects of poverty and social injustice.

Consider, for instance, a program of study designed to develop and prepare those to whom we can entrust the vigor, quality and integrity of this new field of study. This person is a scholar first and foremost, in the fullest sense of the term-someone who will creatively generate new knowledge, critically conserve valuable and useful ideas, and responsibly transform those understandings through writing, teaching, and application (Atkin, 1992)). In other words, the purest notion of scholar-practitioner.

The transition between research and practice must be taught. Organizations that work with a population of youth that are at risk because of poverty or social injustice must understand that learning organizations must improve in every area of performance-not just the single area identified by research (Oborn, 1996). Effective organizations require continuing improvement of everything. Every organization will have to learn to exploit and develop new appellations from its own successes. And, most notably, every organization will have to learn how to invent and organize a systematic process.

Along with organizational change, the researcher must apply change to a broader base. In this context, leaders of the school community in poverty must transform community attitudes in order to foster change effectively (Drucker, 1993). Change is clearly a disposition to individual vision, collaborative mission and a commitment to fundamental research that directs and has an impact upon policy. The fundamental ability for organizations to survive in the 21st century is the capacity to
assume a posture of change that involves a wide swath of stakeholders and to encourage research at the practitioner level (Oborn, 1996).

The interrelationship between change, practical/action and theoretical/basic research is fundamental. A vision of change, coupled with the ability to formulate effective research, gives the educational leader, as well as the teacher, a chance to have an impact upon education in a very real and dramatic sense.

The effective Doctor of Philosophy Program must embrace the notion of teaching, signature pedagogy, laboratories of practice and finally a “capstone” experience. This notion of laboratory schools has been a foundational notion for many years. For example, the medical community has long embraced an arduous and uncommon expectation of training and internship. Spanning years of intense “capstone’ experiences the physician is embedded in cohorts of academic and practical challenges that prepare the physician as a researcher and practitioner. A school of poverty can be a very important laboratory for social justice and the ultimate removal of instructional gaps created by social factors undergirding poverty. (Fullan, 1994)

A School-University Collaboration Model: A program of change in a poor school that worked.

Teacher research, like the training of instructional leaders, is critical to the instructional process. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) discussed the results of 21 different teacher research projects. Their work reinforces the importance of teacher research and “identifies and investigates a distinctive set of problems of practice that outside researchers cannot address because they do not stand in the same relationship to the practice of teaching” (p. 120). Cochran-Smith and Lytle also argue that research is more than just another process of accumulating knowledge. Teacher research is a way of creating social change and school restructuring. The impact of teacher research should always be felt in the classroom; it must have an impact upon students.

Educational leaders, and Doctoral faculty, must develop a workable process that will encourage doctoral candidates to research in field-based environments and train others to do the same. While there are not many specific models for encouraging this type of research, there is a model that supports the notion of leadership and the process of integration between a university and a school district. This School-University Collaboration Model puts into motion and organized method of implementing a process within a school district to support leadership based research. This model is not linear. From Figure 1 it is apparent that feedback and support occur throughout (Oborn, 1996)

This model was implemented in Ripley, Ohio. Over a two-year cycle the district saw success in encouraging teachers to develop projects that called for inquiry rather than creativity. This model was not only promoted, funded, and encouraged by this author’s administration, but the teachers who participated in the projects were recognized and rewarded by both the university and the school. The model included four phases and can be initiated at any time within any school district. While this
example of collaboration did not directly involve doctoral students, it did use doctoral students for direction and research-based initiatives for all teachers. The results indicated that as more and more teachers began to research solutions to poverty and failure, the school leaders found and used effective protocols for change that were unknown and unforeseen prior to this initiative (Oborn, 1996).

Phase one established time for teachers to learn about inquiry, and to sustain dialogue about the notion of research. Phase two focused upon the implementation and funding of teacher research. Phase three was the continuation and replication of teacher research projects and phases four encouraged teachers to be researchers on an ongoing basis. Teachers who were able to become trainers help encourage other teachers to perform research.

This four phase process, while somewhat generic, has been field tested. The aforementioned four phase process was tested in Ripley, Ohio. Using some of Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) the Ripley Schools began implementation of a process that would encourage teachers to perform research. In the first year of implementation 15 teachers participated in the program.

Phase one of the schematic directed dialogue that would help teachers understand the initial phases of conducting inquiry. As noted in the flow chart, this phase involved the articulation between a university and a school district. This cooperative effort began through a staff development program that occurred throughout the school year. Teacher dialogue with professors on a small group or individual basis was completed. Continued instruction in hypothesis formulation, data collection, and literature review occurred with a connection to the teacher’s “burning desire”. This burning desire of the teacher was developed through dialogue between the teacher, members of the leadership team, college professors and Ph.D. students from the university. The university and the leadership team encouraged the teachers to openly discuss ideas for research, development in their own academic fields and, as applied to their own desires, cultural dialogue on strategic interventions for learning. The dialogue and instructional portion of this model established trust between the university, the instructor and the school so this desire could service.

The instruction phase of this project included on site visits to the university. This phase took the teachers to the university campus. Teachers were provided with a different learning environment that would help foster inquiry. Working with a Ph.D. class which was studying the structure of knowledge and research, teachers worked with a mentor to develop their hypotheses. This connection to the campus continued for one semester with at least three visits to the campus. Once the instructional dialogue had begun and teachers were able to begin research, phase two, implementation and funding began. The teachers engaged in learning channels that directly related to leadership and the notions inherent in change.

Good research will result in some form of change in the system. For such research to be effective, teachers must know that a commitment has been made by the
leadership team to develop programs and foster teacher inquiry that will have an impact on the teacher’s class as well as the school system. A continued monitoring by the leadership team and the university is vital at this stage. After the initial instruction and hypothesis development, the teachers should begin implementation. Barriers to the development of the teacher’s projects must be removed. Resources must be committed to provide the needed equipment and supplies. Time away from the classroom, time to collaborate with other staff and/or university faculty, and appropriate support for the frustration of research must be provided. In other words, a commitment to the teacher/researcher must be made by the board of education, faculty and staff.

Phase three supported the notion that change can have an impact upon teachers. The entire staff of a school district can replicate others' work and benefit from their research. This is a vital part of the School-University Collaboration Model. While economic and administrative support is needed at the onset of the research projects, this support is also needed throughout the teacher research cycle. This cycle can last for several years and should evolve to be a strong marriage between university, school and staff. Ultimately, every project should be replicable and serve as a model for other teachers in the field.

The educational leader can stimulate continuity and teacher participation at level three by committing fiscal resources to the model. When the school leader recognizes teacher projects on a local and regional level, other teachers begin to participate. Published results begin to impact and change reform movements designed from research and tested in the laboratory of a classroom. Unless there is a commitment to make systemic classroom, school or community change this model will not have an impact on instructional change.

The commitment to teacher inquiry is strengthened in phase four. Teacher research becomes the ultimate goal. In other words, once teachers invest in the School-University Collaboration Model, they will begin to develop the ability to be peer trainers. This teacher/researcher role must be encouraged using the core of teachers who have completed the process.

The School-University Collaboration Model was implemented to develop enduring, research-based change in an extremely poor school. The inherent nature of the scholar-practitioner presents concepts that are strengthened by both experiential and evidentiary results. A Ph.D. program that highlights research, best practices, prescriptive pedagogy and leader mentoring stands to be both unique and effective. The collaboration between schools and universities provides a symbiotic relationship that designs both “internship” and “externship” opportunities. In other words, the Ph.D. candidates work in the school using the experience as both a pedagogical and research-based laboratory. The school district, in a similar sense, uses the university as an external bank of resources that direct research, inquiry designs and data that suggest school based methods for social change as they apply to poverty.
Finally, the Ripley School district had cultural strands that supported external applications to other schools of poverty. Ripley is/was the fourth poorest school from the bottom in Ohio (2008). The population was embedded in an Appalachian culture that was supporting limited matriculation to colleges, teen pregnancy and failure. The transient nature of Ripley suggested that over 21% of the population was special needs. Over 73% of the student population was on free and reduced lunch, and the number of non-traditional families reflected national statistics for schools in poverty. The school-university Model presented is an excellent example of laboratory-based experiences that train change agents in both the university and school based classrooms.

A Doctor of Philosophy in Education and Social Change: The Bellarmine Initiative

Birthed from a vision to develop new and innovative methods of social change that will impact children of poverty, and based on the faculty’s extensive research and underscored needs of disadvantaged children a curricula was developed into a new program proposal at the Annsley Frazier Thornton School of Education at Bellarmine University. Areas of concentration include Literacy Education, Special Education and Educational Leadership. Courses will incorporate both quantitative and qualitative research methodology and provide core knowledge regarding learners in poverty, predicaments, professional ethics and social justice in the Catholic and other traditions, change theory and education innovations, and education politics and policy affecting the underserved.

This Ph.D. program was adapted from corporate models of capacity-building, change management and the diffusion of innovations. The Bellarmine Ph.D. will be a direct implementation of a deep learning and mentoring construct successfully applied in schools serving large numbers of children living at the poverty level. This program incorporates key recommendations of the Carnegie Foundations’s Project on the Education Doctorate (www.carnegiefoundaton.org), particularly in terms of focus, depth and rigor.

Based on the aforementioned discussion collaborative models with schools will be extensive and in-depth. Field experiences will work to develop the Ph.D. candidate’s ability to excite others to research, review and change as they serve children in poverty. The syllabi reflect a diverse and challenging platform designed to create a new leader that is a scholar-practioner who can change and reduce the degeneration of academic achievement so prominent in poverty. Ultimately, the need to understand and challenge conventional theories of poverty will produce schools that can transcend socially birthed failures and deal with the only solution to the cycle of poverty-children.

A Path for the Faculty

The Bellarmine Ph.D. program will adhere, as discussed, to the Carnegie framework, embrace the notion of scholar-practioner, and outline study channels that emphasize organizational change and tease the purest notions of capacity-building and
change management. Also, and in a very significant manner, the program will employ and develop a faculty that presents an evidentiary and experiential framework built on the aforementioned requirements.

The faculty will have experience in a place called school. That experience must translate into positions of leadership that are dedicated to organizational change, servant leadership and an uncommon knowledge of community-stakeholder change. Poverty is nestled in an emotional quandary of cultural entrapment and academic frustration. The faculty must have experience in the fundamental genre of educational poverty and the difficult challenge of improved learning and social justice in schools that are without funding, staff and hope. Academic failure is the capstone for school embarrassment and No Child Left Behind classifications. Poverty, special needs and academic progress align resources in traditional development of reform: And that does not work.

The faculty, therefore, will present with a background of effective change predicated on legitimate research and proved data that are workable and effective. The experiential background must be front and center with respect to schools of poverty. This experience requirement grounds research, provides theoretical frameworks that work and aligns effort with fiscal resources. The faculty will bring to the collegiate classroom experience that translates to change.

Change also requires research. The faculty must embrace teacher-researcher, understand both theoretical and practical research and develop programs that engage other teachers in schools of poverty to invest in research. A unique design for such work places the university in the position of “laboratory,” and engages school districts so they can develop “in-field” research and change from the inside out.

Conclusions

The traditional notion that universities are holders of knowledge and that schools are knowledge receivers must be changed. Increasing time for inquiry and research may be part of the culture of universities, but it is extracurricular in schools (Ponticell, 1990). This cultural difference is significant, and the School-University Collaboration Model and the Bellarmine Ph.D. helps bridge the gap between university research and school-driven inquiry.

University researchers must forsake the exclusivity of their expertise status and welcome the expertise of others (Noddings, 1986). This cultural shift takes time and energy, and will not be accomplished in a short period of time.

University researchers must change the culture of exclusivity. Public school personnel must believe they can produce knowledge as well as disseminate it. In universities, basic research is still more valued than applied research (Bogdan, & Biklen, 1992).
If social change is to occur then change must be an issue of teacher ownership (Hellriegel, Slocum & Woodman, 1992). Further, to enforce the issue of ownership, change must be based on accurate information and thorough thought. Inquiry can produce that type of change. The art of reflection can begin the process of teacher as scholar (Schon, 1983).

Finally, the recommendations of the Carnegie Foundation are benchmarks for an effective Ph.D. program. However, as I would argue, the laboratory perspective is critical. Research would suggest that in-field training is vital for the purposeful and directed reformation of schools of poverty. Developing researchers that are in the loop of inquiry will naturally link the university and Ph.D. candidate to training that will be uncommon and productive.

The scholarship of teaching, signature pedagogy, and laboratories of practice, capstone experiences and best evidence analysis will provide a footprint for a very unique Ph.D. focused on developing change agents focused on schools of poverty. Ultimately, however, the work must provide rigor in research and application if change is to survive. The development of the scholar-practioner is vital. The didactic nature of leadership must also be understood, and the servant-leader will define the notion of learning organizations; inasmuch, provide on-going support for social reform.