

# EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE: ENHANCING THE ETHICAL DIMENSION OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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*Much criticism has been levied in recent years on professional preparation programs in schools of education offering the Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) degree. This article chronicles the attempt of one Jesuit university to respond to that criticism in designing a professional degree with an ethical focus on social justice.*

## INTRODUCTION

“Leadership stands at the crossroads, broadening individual aspirations to embrace social change and building a society that responds to human wants, needs, and values” (Burns, 2003, p. 147).

The recent debate regarding the nature of university educational administration programs has indirectly addressed the issue that Burns described above. For example, Levine (2005) and Young, Crow, Org, Rodney, and Creighton (2005) write about concepts of effective school or school district leadership that are related to successful performance outcomes for all students. Certainly such outcomes have equity implications. Nevertheless, the emphasis of these discussions had more to do with the technical nature of educational leadership development and less to do with “embracing social change and building a society that responds to human wants, needs, and values” (Burns, 2003, p. 147). Recently, a number of scholars have addressed directly the issue of social change in educational leadership, as well as the need to emphasize social justice in leadership preparation programs (Andrews & Grogan, 2002; Brown, 2004, 2006; Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Pounder, Reitzug, & Young, 2002; Starratt, 2003). The emphasis can be on both. This paper is about Saint Louis University’s (SLU) redesigned doctoral program in education (Ed.D) that includes an emphasis on social justice.

Though this paper focuses on a program that is, as Shulman (2004) defined, a professional doctorate, the description of its technical approach to leadership development is not the purpose here. Such information is available elsewhere (Everson et al., 2004; Murphy & Vriesenga, 2005).

## **PURPOSE OF PAPER**

The purpose here is to describe how the faculty members who have developed the new program are working to expand its emphasis on social justice as well as on other moral and ethical leadership concepts in order to increase and enhance the students' understanding of and focus on their ethical role as educational leaders. The paper offers a rationale for embedding ethical and moral issues in leadership education programs, some program implications, and an approach to assess the understanding of social justice and social actions of the program's graduates.

## **SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY AND THE LEADERSHIP PROGRAM**

Saint Louis University is a Jesuit, Catholic university ranked as a Carnegie research institution. The university has more than 11,800 students, of which more than 7,000 are undergraduates and 4,000 are graduate students, including medical and law students. Students come from all 50 states and more than 80 foreign countries. Founded in 1818, SLU is the oldest university west of the Mississippi and the second oldest Jesuit university in the United States. A second campus is located in Madrid, Spain.

One of SLU's graduate departments is the Department of Educational Leadership and Higher Education, located in the College of Public Service. The department offers a master's degree and two doctoral degrees: a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) and a Doctor of Education (Ed.D.). The Ph.D. is a traditional program that is designed to prepare researchers, scholars, and academicians. Currently, approximately 25 students are working actively on their Ph.D. degrees in educational leadership.

The Doctor of Education program focuses on preparing students for professional leadership positions. This program has grown significantly over the past 10 years, since the advent of the cohort structure. The majority of students complete their program together in 3 years, including work during 2 summers. Approximately 280 students are engaged actively in this program.

Unlike many other masters and doctoral programs that prepare professionals at the pre-service level, SLU's Doctor of Education program primarily serves mid-career professional educators who are seeking principal and/or superintendent certification. Over the past 5 years, the average ages

of students enrolled in this program vary between 38 and 43 years of age, with an average experience level of 15 years in professional education.

In the 1970s, the development of the Doctor of Education Program was designed to match the students' age and career status characteristics, and to offer a leadership program that focused on the practical application of the coursework. Initially, the Ed.D. doctoral project report was envisioned as substantially different from the research-based, five-chapter dissertation required of the department's Ph.D. students. Since its inception in the 1970s, however, the Ed.D. doctoral project evolved into a paper with all the characteristics of a Ph.D. dissertation. In early 2001, it became clear to the faculty that this departure from the original intent of the Ed.D. project detracted from the problem-based orientation that was essential to the leadership preparation. The redesigned Ed.D. program was created to strengthen the problem-based learning format and to establish a professional doctorate approach to the preparation of educational leaders. This program development work included a commitment to ethics and social justice. Additional information about these programs can be obtained from the Saint Louis University website (<http://www.slu.edu/colleges/cops/elhe/index.html>).

## RATIONALE

I believe leadership is not only a descriptive term but a prescriptive one, embracing a moral, even a passionate, dimension. Consider our common usage....I contend that there is nothing neutral about leadership; it is valued as a moral necessity. (Burns, 2003, p. 2)

In school leadership, that moral dimension must focus on social justice. The *American Heritage Dictionary* (Soukhanov, 1992) defines the term social as "living together in communities or relating to society" (p. 1710); and, justice as "the quality of being just or fair; the principle of moral rightness; equity" (p. 979). Rebores (2001) writes, "Justice is concerned with the individual's relationship to others in the various communities in which he or she lives" (p. 30). In short, social justice is the quality of fairness that exists within communities or societies. The extent to which fairness and equity exist in a school community is, in part, the responsibility of its leaders.

Either a leadership program formally embraces this ethical dimension or it suffers the influence of the uninformed. Lack of knowledge about social justice does not excuse leaders from responsibility for it. Leaders who are unaware or uninformed about equity and fairness issues, which they face every day, still live with the moral imperative that is embedded in their jobs. For example, one educational issue that persists is the relationship between schooling and students' economic status. Poor youngsters continue to lag

behind others in student performance. This is a social justice issue that effective educational leaders must address. Therefore, preparation programs have a responsibility to prepare leaders to be stewards of social justice in their schools and communities (Brown, 2006; Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Starratt, 2003).

Berliner (2005) has spoken eloquently about the power of poverty in educational outcomes for America's youth, presenting information about the increasing number of children who live in dire poverty and stating that 40% of the poor live below the half mark of the poverty line recognized by the federal government. In citing studies that connected income growth in families to increases in children's school readiness and positive social behavior, Berliner connected poverty to educational outcomes. Rothstein (2004) echoes Berliner, suggesting the need for economic and social reforms in tandem with school and school leadership renewal.

How can educational leadership programs prepare their students to lead schools or school districts effectively without directly addressing the moral obligation to educate every child, regardless of economic status? In the report of an early study connecting principal behaviors to student performance, researchers Smith and Andrews (1989) described this obligation.

Those of us who become school principals assume enormous obligations. The most important of these is to build a structure of relationships within the school so that all children have the opportunity to learn. To fulfill this obligation, school principals must create good schools. By good schools we mean that we use our professional knowledge and skills to create conditions in which each child can grow to his or her full potential and all children are given equal opportunity to succeed in our society. When these conditions are present, there is a measurable increase in the academic performance of children and at the same time, over time, the differences between groups of children (low-income v. affluent, ethnic v. white students) are reduced. (p. 2)

## **PROGRAM IMPLICATIONS**

Formally addressing the ethical dimension of leadership is not new to SLU's educational leadership program. An ethics of leadership course, taught by a scholar in the field, has been required for many years, and equity issues have been addressed in many courses, including school finance, school improvement, and school law. Situated in an urban Jesuit university, the program is expected to address issues of social justice.

The Jesuit mission is to "help souls, especially where the need is greatest, particularly where certain people or certain work was neglected" (Saint Louis University, 2005b, ¶1). The commitment to social justice is foundational. That commitment is apparent in SLU's support of the urban neighbor-

hood in which it resides, as well as to the students, including graduate students, who live and work in the city's poorest communities.

While all of SLU's programs focus on social justice in some way, the new Ed.D. program is more intentional in this effort than some. As the design of the new program emerged, the faculty reviewed materials that were foundational to its work: the department's goals, SLU's "Five Dimensions of a University Experience," and the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996). The documents' overlap was notable. For example, servant leadership is a clear expectation in each. More importantly, the documents describe effective leaders as fair and just. One of SLU's five dimensions, "leadership and service," captures the essence, stating "By serving others and by promoting social justice, students become men and women for others who lead by example" (Saint Louis University, 2005a, ¶5).

Furthermore, every one of the six ISSLC standards (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996) begins with an assumption of equity by stating, "The school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by" (p. 8). Standard 5 is devoted to the ethical dimension of leadership, ending with "acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner" (p. 18).

The question for the SLU faculty was how to operationalize these foundational concepts in pedagogy, clinical experiences, and learning outcomes. Making the ethical obligations of educational leadership central to the doctoral experience was a priority. The faculty answered the question by: (a) designing and implementing a team project approach in which students work together and reflect on their learning throughout the program; (b) requiring readings that increase knowledge related to the ethical dimensions of leadership, especially justice; and (c) creating a graduation requirement that includes an analysis of the ethical dimensions of leadership. Marshall and Ward (2004) offered recommendations to programs that prepare leaders to address social justice issues. In brief, the recommendations are: (a) the case must be made for social justice; (b) use policy as a lever to address social justice; and (c) education of administrators for social justice must occur in multiple arenas with collaborative partners. SLU's new Ed.D. program has addressed these three recommendations.

## **TEAM PROJECTS**

Unfortunately, most Leadership Development Programs focus exclusively on simple skills—and although these techniques are useful, they are not enough....Developing oneself as a leader is a day-by-day, lifelong, process that is built on continued self-examination, introspection, and soul-searching honesty. (Bennis & Goldsmith, 2003, p. 24)

One underlying assumption of SLU's redesigned Ed.D. program is that continued self-examination is essential to the leaders' ability to improve the organizations they lead. The faculty believed that placing students in project teams, whose work was grounded by faculty guidance and program structures, would enhance the students' understanding and use of that reflection process.

Thus, the Ed.D. program now requires students to work on teams of three or four to complete a comprehensive project focused on a current educational issue. A team project report and an individual analysis report, which will be described later, have replaced the traditional dissertation that was required for graduation. Structures were built into the program, in order to tie the team project work to a reflective process focusing on effective, ethical leadership.

Larson and LaFasto's (1989) *Teamwork* and Lewis' (2002) *Fundamentals of Project Management* are required texts. These texts provide nuts and bolts information that helps teams function effectively, including their ability for self-examination. What they learn from doing so is applicable to their work in schools.

Additionally, each project team works on problems that are situated in educational settings outside the university, including schools, districts, and other educational organizations such as state departments of education. Each team is assigned an advisor who enhances the team's learning by asking provocative questions, stimulating discussion, and critiquing the team members' work. This guidance has allowed the faculty to focus the students' reflective practice and "soul searching" on the ethical dimension of their leadership as well as on the development of skills and knowledge. Though the program is young, entering its fourth year, a small number of students have completed their studies. They uniformly reported that the team project increased their reflective practice regarding the meaning and quality of their work.

## REQUIRED READINGS

We need leaders...who can situate themselves within the larger historical narrative of this country and world, who can grasp the complex dynamics of our peoplehood and imagine a future grounded in the best of our past, yet attuned to the frightening obstacles that now perplex us. Our ideals of freedom, democracy and equality must be involved to invigorate leadership that can motivate "the better angels of our nature," as Lincoln said, and activate possibilities for a freer, more efficient and stable America—only that leadership deserves cultivation and support. (Cornel West as cited in Bennis & Goldsmith, 2003, p. 1)

In order to provide a solid theoretical foundation for students in the Ed.D. program, the faculty identified 10 books that the students are required to read. Adhering to the goals of situating the students "within the larger historical narrative of this country and world" and increasing the students'

knowledge about leadership for change, the faculty narrowed a long list of nominated books to 10 (Bennis, 1989; Burns, 1978; Collins, 2001; Dewey, 1938; Fullan, 2001; Gardner, 1990; Kozol, 1991; Rawls, 1971; Rousseau, 1947; Senge, 1990). The list makes clear the faculty's attention to social justice. Some critics have questioned the book list for its traditional makeup and encouraged the department to expand the list. That review is planned. Until then, the faculty believes that the content of this work is broad-based and provocative, including such content as the nature of democracy in education, a theoretical classic of the nature of justice, a raw description of inequality in schools, and discussions of effective leadership and organizations.

The book list is given to the students during their first semester. Students meet with their advisors for 4 semesters during their program. The curriculum for these meetings includes discussions of the books, focusing on their value to educational leadership. The culmination of these discussions occurs in a student's oral examination when questions about the student's understanding of the books are addressed. The students' discussions of this work are stimulating. At the end of the program, questions focusing on an analysis of the readings are included in the oral examinations.

## **GRADUATION REQUIREMENT**

Expanding the bases of leadership practice to include moral bases, being concerned with the virtuous side of school life, and seeking to create covenantal communities in schools can help provide the measure of common meaning needed for schools to work and work well. (Sergiovanni, 1992, p. 118)

Expanding the bases of leadership practices to include moral bases has been built into the graduation requirement for SLU's Ed.D. students. In order to graduate, each project team completes a comprehensive project report that describes its work in one of three formats: problem-based learning, policy analysis, or product development. Each format overlaps with the others in that all projects include some aspects of problem-based analyses, policy analyses, and product development. The primary format is clear in the final outcome of the work.

Additionally, each Ed.D. student completes an individual report in which a major component is an analysis of the relationship between the student's Ed.D. project experience and dimensions of leadership, including ethics and social justice. In the individual report, the student connects his or her learning to:

- Department Goals:
  - To prepare reflective practitioners committed to excellence in service to others.
  - To install four "habits" within our students: the habit of service, the

habit of inquiry and research, the habit of self-examination and reflection, and the habit of leadership within a community of scholars.

- To offer students an excellent professional education and a sound background within the liberal tradition of education.
- To reaffirm and strengthen a commitment of service to the community.
- SLU's Five Dimensions of the University Experience:
  - Scholarship and Knowledge—by developing a well-rounded educational foundation which incorporates learning through experience. (Saint Louis University, 2005a, ¶2)
  - Intellectual Inquiry and Communication—by developing the abilities of intellectual inquiry and communication. (¶3)
  - Community Building—by welcoming and working with others, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, or gender...[leading] to respect and compassion for human life and the dignity of each person. (¶4)
  - Leadership and Service—by serving others and by promoting social justice. (¶5)
  - Spirituality and Values—by developing spirituality, values, and openness...to guide their actions and their relationships with others. (¶6)
- The ISSLC Standards: The school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by:
  - facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community. (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996, p. 10)
  - advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth. (p. 12)
  - ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment. (p. 14)
  - collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources. (p. 16)
  - acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner. (p. 18)

The student's advisor and one other faculty member, who is the student's reader, review each draft of the individual report. The three of them discuss the drafts, and revisions are made in preparation for the oral examination in which the student's report is addressed, along with the team report, and the readings. In this process, the student's perspectives about the ethical dimen-



sions of leadership, including social justice, are discussed and developed. The student's oral examination is given by the advisor, the reader, and three other faculty members. Upon successfully passing the oral examination, the student is approved for graduation.

## **CURRICULUM SUPPORT**

It is important to add some information about the curriculum and its support of this work before closing. The Ed.D. students, who aspire to be certified, take the courses that are required for that certification, including traditional courses such as finance, law, personnel evaluation, and so forth. What sets the courses apart is that each course includes an analysis of the implications for equity and justice. For example, the finance course addresses the fairness of school funding formulas; the facility course focuses the facility's support of learning for all students, regardless of the wealth of the district; and so on. Additionally, the course in ethics is required and the courses that focus on administration and leadership are grounded in the literature on effective leaders who meet the needs of all students. Initial assessment indicates that our graduates show an understanding of their role as educational leaders in the area of social justice. Currently, the department is developing a process to assess leadership for social justice in our graduates.

## **ASSESSING SOCIAL JUSTICE IN GRADUATES**

In addition to the program changes described above, SLU's educational leadership program has changed the assessment of its graduates. Using a combination of surveys, interviews, and analyses of public data, the program assesses its graduates as ethical leaders—specifically as stewards of social justice.

Annually, graduates in years 1, 3, and 5 after they graduate complete a survey. The revised survey includes items that address dimensions of leadership for social justice, ranging from instructional leadership to political advocacy.

To corroborate survey findings, a sample of survey respondents, as well as their employers, are interviewed. Regarding social justice, graduates are asked to talk about their experience with social justice. The evaluation team debated about the degree of specificity in the question and decided that successful graduates should have no trouble discussing their perspectives about social justice in their work, in their daily lives, and the impact of their doctoral studies on their awareness of equity issues. In a pilot of the new survey, graduates were able to respond to this question.

Interestingly, the majority of the employers did not hold SLU degrees and were unable to respond to the same open-ended question. To ensure that the interview generated comparable responses from graduates and their employers, the social justice question had to be changed to, "Saint Louis University defines social justice as the advancement of a just society for all, especially the poor and vulnerable. How would you describe your stewardship of social justice in your work?" For the employer interview, this question asks the respondent to describe the employee's stewardship of social justice.

The department tracks several indicators of school type and student performance in graduates' schools and districts. Over time, trends associated with the leaders' schools can be monitored. For example, state data are collected regarding each respondent's district or school to determine the percentage of their students who qualify for free or reduced-priced lunches. These data indicate whether or not graduates are working in districts where there is a serious need for strong leader advocacy for equity. Other indicators include per pupil expenditures, Title I funding, graduation rates, and average yearly performance data, disaggregated by student groups.

Currently, the evaluation team is developing an instrument explicitly designed to assess students' learning related to social justice (Bussey, 2006). Using a survey design methodology, literature was consulted to provide a theoretical framework that identified the domains of social justice and its advocacy. The domains were further refined through practitioner interviews and expert panel reviews. The department is in the process of pilot testing and revising the instrument. The validated instrument will be administered twice, as students begin and end their programs.

## CONCLUSION

Hope is embedded in SLU's new educational leadership program, hope for the development of effective school leaders, hope for the opportunities that good schools engender for their students, and hope for social justice to be a foundational value in the schools and districts that are led by SLU graduates. By intentionally enhancing the dimension of ethical leadership in the redesigned Ed.D. program, the faculty has signaled its desire for such outcomes. Assessment of its graduates will indicate if they have succeeded.

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