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Preparing Future School Leaders to Ensure Racial, Ethnic, Linguistic, and Socio-Economic Equity in Education: The “Third Way”

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Preparing educational leadership to ensure equity in our schools has become a focus of principal preparation programs with some programs relying on a conventional approach, others using a critical approach, and some using a combination of approaches. Despite a focus on equity, students’ race and ethnicity continue to predict the educational attainment of students in our schools and their subsequent economic prosperity. As demographics in European countries and the United States change, the need to educate children of all racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds is no longer only of moral importance, it is of urgent economic significance. To ensure economic prosperity and equitable opportunity, leaders must believe in all students, and they must act accordingly so that every student thrives in our schools. Relying on conventional approaches has failed, and many believe that a pure reliance on critical theory is also failing (Gordon, 2012a; Gordon, 2012b). A theoretical model for a “third way” of preparing leaders for equity and social justice includes “awareness, care, critique, expertise, community, accountability, with relationships at the model’s center” (Gordon, 2012b, p. 3). In this paper, we apply Gordon’s theory (2012) to one strategy we use to prepare leaders to lead for equity and social justice, the Problem Based Learning (PBL) Project. This paper includes an overview of the PBL project, describes the impact of the PBL project on schools and districts, and draws conclusions about the effectiveness of the PBL Project for developing leadership to ensure equity in schools, as described by Gordon’s (2012b) model.

INTRODUCTION

As demographics in European countries and the United States change, the need to educate children of all racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds is no longer only of moral importance, it is of urgent economic significance. To ensure economic prosperity and equitable opportunity, school leaders must believe in all students, and they must act accordingly so that every student thrives in our schools. A direct relationship exists between increased poverty, unemployment, and lower educational attainment in both Europe and in the US (Elger, Kneip, & Theile, 2009; European Commission, 2011; US Department of Labor, 2013). To remedy inequities, many principal preparation institutions cling to what Gordon (2012a) calls “the conventional approach,” in which external control, technical rationality, and

maintenance of the status quo prevail. Other preparation programs rely exclusively on critical theory. Despite efforts to reduce educational disparities in schools through principal preparation programs, students' race and ethnicity continue to predict the educational attainment of students and their subsequent economic prosperity. Gordon's proposed (2012b) "third way" of preparing leaders for equity includes "awareness, care, critique, expertise, community, and accountability, with relationships at the model's center" (p. 3).

While our year-long principal preparation program incorporates all aspects of Gordon's "third way" of preparing leaders for equity, one curriculum decision in particular that supports a "third way" of preparing leaders for equity is our Problem Based Learning (PBL) Project. This paper discusses the PBL Project's a) history, purpose, and alignment with research and state standards for licensing school administrators; b) components, including team formation, equity audit features, presentation of the plan to colleagues; c) impact of the PBL project on schools' and districts' improvement plans; d) students' self-reflections on the PBL Project; and e) program evaluation by Portland State University of the PBL Project's potential to increase leadership for equity; and f) conclusions regarding the PBL providing support for Gordon's (2012) theory of preparing leaders for equity.

PBL PROJECT: HISTORY, PURPOSE, AND THE ALIGNMENT WITH RESEARCH AND STANDARDS

For seven years prior to its current structure, the PBL Project had been a simulation project in Portland State University's administrative licensure program, a program that prepares future school leaders using a year-long cohort model. The program's increasing focus on leadership for equity stimulated a realignment of the program with leadership preparation practices identified as critical to closing the achievement gap: developing a leadership vision (Childress, Doyle, & Thomas, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2007), cultural proficiency (Gay, 2010; Terrell & Lindsey, 2009), reflective practices (Goodlad, 1994), producing meaningful products (Dunbar & Monson, 2011; Spence, 2001), and is founded on evidence of effective leadership practices (Marzano et al., 2005), which involves the community in leadership (President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 2003). To reflect these curricular changes, we selected new texts, including *Leading for Equity: The Pursuit of Excellence in Montgomery County Public Schools* (Childress et al., 2009) and *Culturally Responsive Teaching* (Gay, 2010), to anchor our students' understanding of effective equity practices. Next, we redesigned the PBL Project to include those components.

When redesigning the PBL Project, we also aligned it with our graduate school conceptual framework, state, and national standards. State standards include visionary leadership; instructional improvement; effective management; inclusive practice; ethical leadership; socio-political context; and practicum completion. The PBL Project is also aligned with state expectations for "School Improvement Plans" mandated by the federal law known as "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB), specifically in areas related to community engagement and reaching achievement targets for all children. The PBL also addresses equity issues raised by Childress, Doyle, and Thomas (2009) Elger, Kneip, and Theile (2009); the European Commission (2011); Frattura and Capper (2007); Gay (2010); Gordon (2012a; 2012b); Heath, Rethon, and Kilpi (2008); as well as Johnson and Avelar La Salle (2010).

COMPONENTS OF THE PBL PROJECT

Believing that hypothetical or simulated projects rarely reflect the complexities of today's schools, the PBL Project was designed to be school-based. The PBL Project required students to form teams, conduct an equity audit at the school site, identify evidence-based interventions, solicit input from stakeholders, develop and present the plan to colleagues, and engage in self-reflection. Using current data, national and local research, practicum experiences, the budget of a local school, and seeking input from teachers, the community and students, the intern team then completes the project with the permission and support of the school principal and cohort leader. These processes are aligned with "incidental learning" (Marsick & Watkins, 1990), which can occur in "social interactions, life and work experiences, trial-and-error, mistakes, problem solving and adapting to new situations" (Cahoon, 1995, as cited in Crawford & Machemer, 2008, p. 106; English, 1999; Ross-Gordon & Dowling, 1995). The scoring rubric for the project uses the terminology of the state standards and requires proficiency in all standards in order to receive the scores required for completion of the administrative licensure program.

Forming Teams

For this project, interns self-select into PBL teams, reflecting the process often used in schools. Each team is comprised of grade level or program area interns and follows the process faced by all school leaders when they write, implement, and evaluate a School Improvement Plan: determining when the team will meet, how they will divide up the work, and when they will complete their sections of the project prior to the final due date.

Equity Audit Features

Many educators are familiar with the concept and components of financial audits; few educators are familiar with *equity* audits. While school leader interns exhibit enthusiasm for the concept of an equity audit, they and their schools often have limited knowledge of the components of an equity audit and even less experience conducting one. Equity audits, however, play a critical role in the quest to understand the underlying conditions that lead to race and ethnicity predicting a student's level of academic achievement (Du Four et al., 2006; Johnson & Avelar La Salle, 2010). While the analysis of data disaggregated by race and ethnicity is a key starting point for revealing a school's inequities in student achievement, equity audits also reveal the "hidden" inequities present in schools with achievement gaps (Johnson & Avelar La Salle, 2010), which are notably absent in schools with successful youth of color (Peterson, 2011). "Hidden inequities" include data such as the participation rates of students of color in Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate classes, or the participation of students of color in high prestige clubs and student leadership.

Our student interns were given the option of using an existing district equity audit, although no current intern districts have identified the systematic use of an equity audit in their district. Therefore, we identified three potential equity audits for the PBL Project: Johnson and Avelar La Salle (2010), Skrla, Bell McKenzie, and Scheurich (2009), and Frattura and Capper (2007). Intern teams are allowed to choose the equity audit format, or they revise one of the above examples.

Each equity audit has the following common components into which data inquiry delves: a) academically rigorous program for all students; b) culturally responsive staff and programs; and c) support for students needing additional academic, behavioral, or social-emotional development. Johnson and Avelar La Salle (2010) pose extensive questions in each category of the equity audit to encourage “auditors” to reveal the specific context of inequities in a school. Conducting an equity audit reveals unexpected inequities, which point to many specific steps that schools can employ to reduce inequities and close the achievement gap. We have noticed, as did Gordon (2012a; 2012b), that sharing the equity data is transformational, if it is shared in a caring, supportive environment that allows for self critique, processing the implications of the data, and developing an action plan.

After conducting an equity audit, interns examine evidence-based practices that have influenced educational disparities in similar schools, and identify the practices they will implement for this PBL Project. Interns also speak with, email, or meet with principals from local schools about practices that have contributed to the success of increased student achievement scores in reading, writing, and math.

Based on the equity audit, review of evidence-based practices, self-reflection, and input from stakeholders, the interns create a School Improvement Plan including objectives, professional development strategies, budget, NCLB growth targets, and which is designed to address stakeholder resistance and assessment of goals. PBL Project teams are required to use the state School Improvement Planning template and write SMART Goals (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely). Using the template and writing SMART goals is often challenging for interns; however, using the tools required of school leaders provides interns with a realistic view of the complexity of writing effective action plans.

Next, the PBL Project teams develop presentations of their School Improvement Plans and describe their plans to an audience of practicing administrators who serve as a critical audience. Many of the PBL Project teams also have a representative from the team who presents to the school’s principal, superintendent, board, or other committee. Each cohort approaches the presentation portion of the plan slightly differently. Two cohorts presented their plans to experienced administrators at Continuing Professional Development events; another gave peer presentations.

IMPACT

While many school districts engage in long-term, systematic training in equity, none of the districts in which our interns work conducted systematic equity audits of their schools. Through the PBL Project, interns were able to introduce the concept of equity audits to school district and school leaders, and when responding to the intern teams’ queries for data, especially data for the equity audit, school and district leadership became interested in the PBL Project.

Though many school leaders had been unfamiliar with equity audits, they welcomed the information, much of which revealed what Johnson and Avelar La Salle (2010) refer to as “hidden” data. The equity audit uncovered data heretofore not examined or unavailable, which indicated that students of color are overrepresented in detention and discipline data, and underrepresented in honors or talented and gifted programs. Subsequently, interns were able to write implementation plans that specifically addressed these issues.

We consider that the result of inviting schools to focus on educational disparities in schools is the most important impact of our PBL Project, as we have shifted the discussion from whole school data to data disaggregated by race, ethnicity, socio-economic status and other factors. This focus on equity and social justice is critical leadership work to ensure equitable opportunities for each student.

In addition to focusing school discussions on equity, the PBL Project contributed to school improvement projects that were later adopted by individual schools. In at least four cases within one school year, teams were asked to present their data to additional school audiences at their sites; subsequently, these schools or districts adopted parts of, or the entire, PBL action plans. Adopted plans included several evidence-based plans that transformed schools and districts: a) adding a very successful college preparation program (AVID) as a strategy to close the educational achievement gap; b) conducting cost-neutral equity trainings monthly at an elementary school; c) implementing a culturally responsive middle school literacy and science plan, and d) significant revisions to English Language Learner programs.

STUDENT REFLECTION

As a result of site-based interactions, interns expressed high satisfaction with this project. In fact, exit data from students at the conclusion of 2011, indicated that 98% of students determined the PBL Project was “good” or “excellent” in preparing them for the work leadership for equity. Our students reported that this project was both demanding and extremely rewarding in preparing them for equity leadership. The redesigned PBL Project causes interns to focus directly on the issues of race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and student achievement, causing them to create School Improvement Plans that challenge the status quo. As one intern said of the PBL Project:

Working collaboratively with colleagues in the [school leadership] cohort on an equity audit gave me an opportunity to work with a diverse group of experts planning to solve school based problems. From one colleague with an engineering and data background, I learned how to more effectively analyze data available through the district's administrative portal. From another I learned about literature that would be useful to my current or future school for Professional Learning Community studies. Meanwhile, I was able to share my knowledge of Bilingual and ESL methodologies and RTI reading interventions with my team. We had the experience of putting our heads together, both in class, and online to do an equity audit, looking at real data and site resources, and create a plan of action [our] school could take to close the achievement gap. (Cohort Intern, personal communication, June, 2011)

As students reported in the exit data, “The PBL has real potential to analyze and plan for a school environment.” Another student wrote, “The PBL was one of the most effective components of the program.” Despite the rigor of the project, the stress of preparing and presenting a proposal for sitting administrators, and having a limited time frame in which to complete the project, students affirmed our belief that it would prepare them to be leaders for equity and would positively impact our schools.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

The PBL Project, in its original design, was not immediately successful and was almost abandoned. After the 2009–2010 school year, the PBL Project was perceived by students and staff as being redundant to the year-long research-based Educational Leadership Project (ELP). Although we considered this information, we were not confident that the students who completed the program were prepared to focus on equity leadership. By reimagining the final PBL Project through an equity lens, we improved a project that appeared to be fading in relevance, and increased the likelihood that students were prepared to address issues of equity in their schools.

As a result of our spring 2011 cohorts' efforts and the redesign of the equity component, we decided to keep the project. The unexpected adoption of the PBL Projects by four schools was compelling as well and caused us to further emphasize data analysis and problem solving throughout the cohort. Much like Dunbar and Monson's (2011) findings from the Cahn Fellow Program, we found our students and their principals faced similar dilemmas. Dunbar and Monson (2011) wrote, "Too often principals respond to the symptom rather than the root cause of the challenge" (p. 43). Allowing our interns to struggle with inequity in schools enabled them to rise to the challenge and produce effective, relevant plans for improvement. Similarly, when we strengthened our focus on equity throughout the PBL Project, the quality of the interns' experience and the benefits to the school site increased.

CONNECTION TO "THE THIRD WAY"

Gordon (2012a, 2012b) persuasively argues for a "third way" to prepare school leaders to be leaders for equity and social justice, a model that neither promulgates the status quo ("the conventional approach"), nor increases conflict or marginalizes perspectives ("the critical approach"). Specific features of the PBL Project that support Gordon's "third way" include:

1. Awareness: Following completion of a cultural autobiography, students analyze data from an equity audit using one of three frameworks (Frattura & Caper, 2010; Johnson & Avelar La Salle, 2010; Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2004).
2. Critique: Identification of culturally responsive and evidence-based practices contributing to increased achievement scores in reading, writing and math (Delpit, 2002; Gay, 2010; Lindsey et al., 2005; Nieto, 2000; Tatum, 1997).
3. Expertise and Community: Working with those in the school community to develop a plan of action based on equity audit data, evidence-based research, the school profile, budget, school improvement goals and expectations of the school's governing body and presenting the plan to the community, administrators, or colleagues.
4. Accountability: Identifying ways to measure progress toward goals, self-assessing the success of the plan, modifying the plan based on data.

While the PBL Project does not specifically include Gordon's theory of the role of care and relationships, these two components are hallmarks of our pedagogy and how we prepare our future leaders to work with their school communities (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997; Gay, 2010; Noddings, 1992).

CONCLUSION

For several years prior to our PBL Project revision in 2011, Problem Based Learning was an exciting alternative to traditional classroom learning. It was, however, not meeting all the needs of our future leaders, nor was it focusing directly on equity. Our success increased after we asked interns to use data from an equity audit in their PBL Project. The use of SMART goals and implementation plans increased. The involvement of stakeholders increased. We learned that neither school administrators nor staff had examined much of the data that revealed inequities prior to the audits. By itself, this discovery was eye-opening. Though the focus on equity data was critical, additional components of the PBL Project were also instrumental to our redesign. One was identification and analysis of local practices that contribute to student achievement. Another was closer alignment with the School Improvement Plan documents required by the State Department of Education. Together, these changes increased the impact of the project. Through their participation in this PBL Project, interns were able to create School Improvement Plans that increased their ability to address the achievement gaps present in their schools, which were immediately useful in their districts, and increased the intern's confidence and sense of professional efficacy. Our experience suggests that a focus on equity in the PBL Project significantly contributes to principal preparation for school improvement, and as such, is an excellent example of a "third way," a caring, collaborative way to provide leadership for equity in our schools.

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