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Need for Practice-Based Research in School Administration

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Abstract

Purpose: This article’s first objective is to establish the need for elevating the quantity and quality of practice-based research in school administration. The requirement is addressed in relation to (a) persisting social demands for school reform, (b) heightened demands for evidence-based practice in all professions, and (c) persistent criticisms indicating that field’s knowledge base and practice protocols are fragmented and weak. The second purpose is to propose that the need should be addressed at the level of individual preparation programs; specifically, faculty should assume responsibility for identifying and eradicating barriers to practice-based research.

Proposed Conceptual Argument: In the context of an information-based society, practitioners in all professions are expected to access and analyze empirical data when addressing problems and making decisions. In school administration, the failure to respond to this anticipation presents both a social challenge (improving school effectiveness) and a professional challenge (legitimizing the need for practitioners to be licensed), and both are magnified by philosophical and epistemological dissonance among faculty.

Implications: Reliance on external accountability in the absence of internal accountability will neither foster school improvement nor build social authority in school administration. Specifically, persistent indifference toward practice-based research and evidence-based practice will fuel doubts about the efficacy of professional administrators and the need to license them.

In the wake of these problems, school administration’s social capital has been diminished to a point where state policymakers are now reconsidering the need to license practitioners in this field. Addressing the mounting popularity of deregulating licensure for superintendents and principals, Kowalski (2004) argued that this policy decision would destroy the delicate balance between politics and professionalism in public education; and as a result, school boards would be permitted to employ persons for pivotal positions even though they had little or no academic preparation or experience relevant to the challenges they would face.

In light of prevailing conditions, our primary purpose here is to focus on what is arguably the most troubling criticism of administrator preparation—a weak body of research that fails to address the central problems of practice. In addressing this issue, we first summarize school administration’s past and present status as a profession; focused attention is given to the evolution of the field’s knowledge base. Next, we define evidence-based practice (EBP), a concept now normative in many other professions, to demonstrate why the production and use of practice-based research is more essential now than at any other time in the past. Last, we urge faculty in preparation programs to identify and eradicate conditions that diminish the value placed on practice-based research.

School Administration as a Profession

Professions are occupations with distinctive power and prestige. “Society grants these rewards because professions
have special competence and esoteric bodies of knowledge linked to central needs and values of the social system” (Larson, 1977, p. x). In return for services rendered, practitioners are granted influence, autonomy, social status, and often a considerable amount of compensation. When practitioners fail to meet society’s expectations, their privileges are likely to be rescinded. At a collective level, a profession’s effectiveness is determined by the extent to which society’s problems are solved or managed and by the quality of decisions made by its practitioners (Kowalski, Petersen, & Fusarelli, 2007).

Practice in school administration has been and continues to be shaped by ubiquitous tensions between democracy and professionalism (Wirt & Kirst, 2005). During the first few decades of the last century, many school boards resisted yielding too much power to superintendents (Callahan, 1962; Carter & Cunningham, 1997); they were especially suspicious of administrators who tried to cloak themselves in professionalism in order to gain status and power (Björk & Gurley, 2005; Kowalski & Björk, 2005). By the 1930s, a compromise was reached to ameliorate tensions between democratic localism (citizens pursuing their individual interests) and professionalism (educators acting on behalf of societal interests); specifically, school administrators were permitted to call themselves professionals but they were denied the levels of trust and autonomy accorded to practitioners in other professions (Kowalski, 2004).

Though licensing standards for many professions have been strengthened over the past 2 decades (May, 2001), those for principals and superintendents have diminished in a number of states. As examples, 4 states no longer issue or require principals to be licensed and provisions for alternative licensure have been ratified in 18 others (Anthes, 2004); concurrently, eight states and the District of Columbia no longer issue or require a superintendent’s license and provisions for emergency or alternative licenses exist in over half of the remaining states (Feistritzer, 2003).

Professions are considered to have three classical pillars: the cognitive, the collegial, and the moral (Starr, 1982). The cognitive is especially relevant here because it constitutes the intellectual justification for professional standing. Accordingly, society expects a profession to have a pertinent, accurate, and expanding knowledge base that is the foundation for practice protocols. Evaluating conditions in school administration, Elmore (2007) argues that neither benchmark being met. Specifically, he contends that the knowledge base is fragmented and incomplete and that practice protocols either do not exist or are ignored. Since a knowledge base and practice protocols stem from research (Heck & Hallinger, 2005), the nature, quantity, and quality of formal inquiry conducted in and for a profession are significant factors determining a profession’s social capital.

Evidence-Based Practice and Research in Professions

Defining Evidence-Based Practice

After America began transitioning from being a manufacturing society to becoming an information-based society circa 1970, the volume of research conducted in the country increased rapidly resulting in the unprecedented expansion of knowledge across most professions (Howard, McMillen, & Pollio, 2003). Acceptance of EBP as a normative standard, especially in human services professions, was one result of this scientific revolution (Kowalski, 2009). According to Efraim (2004), EBP is rooted in decision-making research and is “aimed at improving rather than understanding human capability” (p. 93). Originally, it was construed as a decision-making philosophy emphasizing “the conscientious and judicious use of current best evidence” (Sackett, Strauss, Richardson, Rosenberg, & Haynes, 2000, p. 2). Intended to enhance effectiveness and accountability, the concept sets up three standards for practitioners: (a) intended outcomes must be stated clearly; (b) a rationale must be provided for selected interventions; (c) the evidence guiding decisions must be identified (Rosen, 1993).

In the medical profession, EBP is commonly called evidence-based medicine. Cordell and Chisholm (2001) describe the process as (a) formulating answerable questions, (b) rapidly searching for best evidence to answer these questions, (c) critically appraising the evidence for validity and applicability, and (d) integrating this appraisal with clinical expertise and a patient’s values, and then applying it to the individual patient (p. 13). The last integrative activity illuminates the essential nature of craft knowledge and values in EBP.

EBP in School Administration

Though some degree of cynicism about the validity and utility of research is expressed in all professions, the level of doubt conveyed by educators has been extraordinary (Gersten, 2001). Two factors partially explain skepticism toward empirical evidence. The first is a lack of expertise; that is, many educators, and especially those without doctoral degrees, feel unprepared to conduct, analyze, or even apply research findings in their efforts to solve problems (Inmegart, 1990). The second factor relates to the nature of research conducted in education generally and school administration specifically. According to Heck and Hallinger (2005) many studies, including those published in leading journals, have been basically irrelevant to practice. After reviewing several books published on research in educational leadership in 2005 and 2006, Levin (2006) concluded that the knowledge base remains weak, especially on the most important questions posed by the field. He added that disagreements over the value of research and dissimilar interpretations of the same studies prevent empirical findings from influencing practice. As a result of negative or indifferent attitudes toward research,
many superintendents and principals have developed an idiosyncratic perspective of practice—that is, they perceive problems to be unique situations requiring unique responses (Elmore, 2007).

Summarizing education’s aversion to research and the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act ([NCLB], 2002) at the dawn of the 21st century, Slavin (2002) lamented that educators had to be dragged, kicking and screaming, into the scientific revolution that previously swept across other professions decades earlier. Characterizing most educational research during the 20th Century as being haphazard, he added that evidence had been respected only occasionally and only if it corresponded “to current educational or political fashions” (p. 16). Though EBP has not been widely embraced or even considered in the field of school administration (Kowalski, 2009), pressures to engage in data-based decision making are pushing practitioners to consider the concept (Kowalski, Lasley, & Mahoney, 2008).  

Implications for Practice-Based Research

Practice-based research (or practice research) is predicated on the conviction that only some aspects of problems and contextual variables are unique. This perspective elevates the need to integrate theory and practice, primarily by conducting research that tests and refines theory in the context of practice-based problems. Thus, practice-based research is defined as inquiry that integrates theoretical, technical, and practical knowledge domains (Oancea & Furlong, 2007). Mayer (2003), however, cautions that it does not involve developing evidence from fads, doctrines (e.g., constructivism), and popular practices. Applied effectively, practice-based research produces evidence that is (a) relevant to a problem or decision, (b) corroborated by other evidence, and (c) is free of errors and bias (Thomas, 2004). A failure to produce relevant practice-based research is clearly detrimental for a profession for at least two reasons. First, the knowledge base is not expanding as it should in an information-based society, and second, it is less likely that practice protocols are being developed or improved.

Given the critical role of practice-based research in professions, why has so little attention been given to this process in school administration? In large measure, indifference is explained by the evolution of the field’s knowledge base during the previous century.

Stage 1 (1900 to 1949). Until 1950, the practice in school administration relied heavily on trial and error. Inattentiveness to theory was so pervasive that the word rarely appeared in administration textbooks (Culbertson, 1988). Professional preparation during this period relied heavily on tacit knowledge gleaned from prominent practitioners, many of whom became professors after leaving practice.

Stage 2 (1950 to 1975). After World War II, the social sciences developed rapidly in academia. The quantity of research being conducted multiplied and quantitative controlled studies became the gold standard for theory building (Maxwell, 2004). School administration professors, especially those at research universities, were pressured to emulate colleagues in fields such as anthropology, political science, psychology, and sociology, primarily by developing theories and making them the nucleus of classroom instruction. Leading figures in the theory movement espoused that empirical research and theoretical courses would elevate both practitioner effectiveness and the profession’s status (Culbertson, 1988).

Stage 3 (1976 to 2000). Four cross-cutting developments intersected to move educational administration away from logical positivism. The first was a growing interest in the development of in-use (or action) theories (Riehl, Larson, Short, & Reitzug, 2000). During the 1970s, noted scholars (e.g., Argyris & Schön, 1974) posited that a profession’s knowledge base could be enhanced by constructs developed in practice and based on reflections of relevant experiences (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993). The second was intense and persistent criticisms of positivist methods (e.g., Apple, 1979; Bates, 1980; Greenfield 1978; Pinar, 1975) that challenged research quality, relevance, and transferability (to practice). The third was mounting advocacy for qualitative research (e.g., Everhart, 1988; Lincoln & Guba, 1985); and the fourth was a growing interest in infusing critical theory into school administration (e.g., Blase, 1995; Foster, 1986). Collectively, these conditions encouraged professors to focus more directly on school administration as a tool for social reconstruction (e.g., social justice, gender equity, and multiculturalism); and as this new perspective was embraced, parameters for acceptable research in the field broadened substantially (Donmoyer, 1999).

After analyzing the evolution of the knowledge base during the previous century, Donmoyer (1999) concluded that school administration professors resigned themselves to co-existing under a big tent. That is, they agreed to disagree about the most fundamental elements of the profession rather than confronting and reconciling obvious philosophical dissonance.

Ironically, the volume of research conducted in and for school administration has actually expanded over the last 4 or 5 decades; however, the scope of research topics has become increasingly diverse and the number of studies legitimately identified as practice-based appears to have declined. After validating this trend, Heck and Hallinger (2005) concluded that philosophical dissonance and dissimilar dispositions toward research were responsible for the ever widening range of studies conducted by school administration faculty and doctoral students—research that became progressively more inattentive to practice. Both Elmore (2007) and Levin (2006) concur that the lack of focus on practice-based research is the primary reason why evidence is not used as in other professions to shape and refine practice protocols.

Practice-Based Research in Preparation Programs

Literally thousands of articles, dissertations, and books are published every year on the subject of education; yet, only
relatively few focus directly on problems of practice. This fact is more disturbing in the aftermath of NCLB, because the law requires educators to identify and weigh empirical evidence when making consequential decisions affecting schools and individual students. In essence, NCLB directs professors to better prepare their students to engage in EBP. To do this, faculty in preparation programs must not only recognize why greater attention has not been given to practice-based research, they must identify and eradicate program-specific barriers that prevent this type of inquiry from being at the center of professional preparation and practice.

**Common Barriers to Practice-Based Research**

Generalizing about the nature and quality of academic preparation and research is precarious because programs and faculty dispositions are not homogeneous. Nonetheless, each of the following issues arguably is relevant to determining the value placed on practice-based research in most preparation programs.

**Practitioner indifference toward research.** Making practice-based research a priority requires an attitude change not only among professors but also among future and present practitioners. Not infrequently, novice superintendents and principals consider research largely irrelevant to problems they encounter, partly because they have not learned to apply research in problem solving and decision making and partly because they do not observe more experienced practitioners making such applications (Kowalski, Petersen, & Fusarelli, 2009). In his studies of elementary and secondary schools, Sarason (1971, 1996) found that educators knew little about research and made virtually no effort to use empirical data to make important decisions. Thus, many educators come to believe that problems of practice are idiosyncratic, and therefore, they rely on intuition to make choices (Hall & Hord, 2006). Elmore (2007) describes this proclivity as anti-intellectual and ineffective.

**Limitations on conducting practice-based research.** Often professors and graduate students are unable to conduct practice-based research because they are denied access to schools and lack necessary resources. Moreover, they may choose to avoid human subject research fearing that they will be unable to obtain required institutional approval for such studies.

**Indeterminate parameters for acceptable research.** Agreements to disagree over the fundamental nature and purpose of school administration often foster a departmental culture in which parameters of acceptable research never get defined. Consequently, faculty and doctoral students are able, if not encouraged, to conduct studies that have little relevance to superintendents and principals.

**Low quality of research.** The quality and relevance of research in school administration also have been criticized for more than 4 decades (Tschannen-Moran & Nestor-Baker, 2004). After the 1970s, many school administration professors embraced process-oriented modes of inquiry, such as ethnography and case studies (Everhart, 1988). Often researchers concluded erroneously that qualitative methods permitted them to self-define rules and procedures; and as a result, qualitative projects often were poorly constructed, inexact, conducted without appropriate controls, unconnected to specific elements of the knowledge base, and unrelated to pervasive problems experienced by administrators (Kowalski & Place, 1998).

**Disputes over methods.** After it was enacted, NCLB reignited questions about the correct definitions of empirical evidence and scientific research (Maxwell, 2004). Within a year, the American Educational Research Association (2003) forged a resolution on scientific research, defining the concept broadly as encompassing various methodologies. The declaration also asserts that because no single method is de facto superior, methodology should be determined by the nature of the research problem and the context in which the study will be conducted. Though educational administration professors generally recognize the potential of various methodologies (Riehl & Firestone, 2005), many are wedded to a single approach. Thus, method may dictate topic; and when this occurs, the general principle of form following function is violated.

**Diverse convictions and interests.** School administration professors remain deeply divided about their role, epistemology, the profession’s future, and the need to reform and standardize academic preparation (Kowalski, 2004). These divisions manifest themselves in research. Professors and graduate students in school administration have pursued four separate research agendas, albeit to varying degrees: (a) research on educational organizations, (b) research on leadership, (c) research on teaching and learning, and (d) research on social context (Rowan, 1995). The last agenda has been pursued more passionately than others in past 10 to 15 years. Advocates of this line of inquiry (e.g., Gunter, 2001; Marshall, 2004) recommend that scholars and practitioners use their research, status, and power to transform school administration into a social justice movement.

**What Should Be Done**

If practice-based research is to play a more prominent role in the school administration, it must be valued, promoted, developed, and applied in professional preparation. As described, reversing the status quo will be difficult and perhaps distasteful in departments where faculty members have self-defined school administration and the boundaries of acceptable research. Nevertheless, we believe that the elevation of practice-based research is most likely if faculty in individual programs rescind their agreement to disagree and enter into deliberate discussions about research, EBP, practice protocols, and the scope of acceptable pre-service preparation. For those willing to accept this challenge, the following tasks provide a framework for their deliberations.

**Defining practice-based research.** Both the expansion of the knowledge base and substantial diversity in research frameworks and methods discussed previously have resulted...
in faculty, even in the same department, conducting and using vastly different types of research focused on vastly different topics (Heck & Hallinger, 2005). Before practice-based research can be valued, it must be defined uniformly. Then, that definition must be applied early and consistently in professional preparation courses, because “the deeper the understanding of a normative standard, the greater the inclination to respond in accord with it” (Kowalski, 2009, p. 15).

Connecting practice based research to professional practice. The essential nature of practice-based research emerges more clearly when school administration is studied in the context of professionalism and expectations that practitioners rely on empirical evidence as well as tacit knowledge and values to make important decisions. Accountability mandates in NCLB intensify expectations that administrators will use data to make important decisions (Petersen & Dlugosh, 2009).

Promoting practice-based research. Symbolically, professional behavior speaks volumes with respect to what is valued, important, and rewarded in professional preparation (Deal & Peterson, 1999). In this vein, the types of research faculty conduct, supervise, and assign to their students communicate critical messages about the value of research to administrative practice.

Building capacity for practice-based research. Conducting studies that address real problems confronted by principals and superintendents often requires faculty to establish positive and trusting relationships with school officials and to secure necessary material resources. Moreover, faculty should define for themselves and for their students the parameters of acceptable human subject research.

Rewarding practice-based research. From an institutional culture perspective, which is rewarded is valued. In this vein, faculty can reinforce the importance of practice-based research by honoring the outstanding work of colleagues and students.

Final Thoughts

Our purposes in this essay were to identify the need for practice-based research in school administration and to urge faculty in individual preparation programs to enter into deliberate discussions on this topic. We believe that the value of such studies cuts across social needs, professional responsibilities, and political realities. From a social perspective, practice-based research has the potential of eradicating recurring school-improvement errors—mistakes such as the proclivity of resurrecting old ideas under new labels and presenting them publicly as reforms (Hall & Hord, 2006). From a professional perspective, practice-based research enhances the quantity and quality of a profession’s knowledge base, making it more probable that practice protocols will be developed and applied (Oancea & Furlong, 2007). And from a political perspective, practice-based research and EBP can build social capital (Eraut, 2004), an outcome that has become highly relevant to reversing the current trend of deregulating or diminishing state licensing standards for administrators (Woodruff & Kowalski, 2008).

Ideally, normative standards for a profession are forged and adopted broadly, usually through a mix of program accreditation and national associations. To date, the issue of practice-based research neither has been defined nor promoted by these forces. Thus, the responsibility for these essential tasks falls most directly on preparation program faculty. Hopefully, the information and perspectives provide here will inspire our colleagues to debate this essential topic.

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