At the Crossroads of Standards and Equity: Merging Practice and Theory to Create the Leadership for Equity Assessment (LEA) Tool

Abstract

Focused on the intersection of standards and equity in leadership, this paper shares one state's efforts to design and validate a professional growth and assessment tool (the Leadership for Equity Assessment) to measure leadership for equity. Merging theory with practitioner language, the tool describes equitable leadership behaviors in each of the Oregon administrative licensure standards along a continuum from unsatisfactory to exemplary. We developed and refined the tool through three iterative phases: 1) Development and initial refinement; 2) Small-scale pilot and focus groups; and 3) Oregon Leadership Network Institute sorting and alignment study. Revisions after each phase resulted in an online guided self-assessment tool that represents a promising instrument for measuring and supporting the development of educational leaders' equitable practice.

1. Objectives or purposes

Principal effectiveness has recently come to the forefront of the national reform agenda as a critical lever for educational improvement, but the literature on principal evaluation is "surprisingly thin" (Davis et al., 2001, p. 36) and "there has been a paucity of instruments and processes that effectively apply the new [leadership] standards" (The Wallace Foundation, 2009, p. 2). Furthermore, some question whether the widely-adopted leadership standards articulated by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLCC) adequately address issues of social justice and equity (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005). Yet, there is an urgent need for educational leaders capable of creating socially just learning environments for all students in the midst of changing student demographics and persistent inequities (Brown, 2004; Marshall, 2004; Murphy, 2002). With a focus squarely on the intersection of standards and equity in leadership, the purpose of this paper is to share one state's efforts to design and validate a professional growth and standards-based assessment tool, the Leadership

for Equity Assessment (LEA), to measure leadership practice for equity.

History and Context

Oregon's state standards for administrative licensure are based upon the ISLLC and Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) standards and include: 1. Visionary Leadership, 2. Instructional Improvement, 3. Effective Management, 4. Inclusive Practice, 5. Ethical Leadership, and 6. Sociopolitical Context. Each standard then has a set of elements with more detailed requirements. For example, Standard 1 (Visionary Leadership) is broken down further into five elements: Develop a Vision, Articulate a Vision, Implement a Vision, Steward a Vision, and Promote Community Involvement in the Vision.

As a result of efforts by the Oregon Leadership Network (OLN) – a leadership development network of state educational agencies, school districts, higher education, and non-profit organizations – the Oregon standards changed in 2005. The revision incorporated cultural competence in each of the six licensure standards with the following statement: "Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge, ability, and cultural competence to improve learning and achievement to ensure success of all students…" (TSPC, 2005).

This change begged the question: What does "equitable practice" look like on the ground, and how do we measure it? In 2007, nearly 250 OLN educators gathered to identify equitable leadership behaviors and activities in each element of the standards along a continuum from beginning to emerging, proficient to exemplary. These markers of equitable practice became the basis of the first draft of the Leadership for Equity Assessment, a set of rubrics to define and measure an educational leader's capacity to foster equity.

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2. Theory: An Educational Equity Framework

In 2010, a four-person team of higher education faculty and OLN leadership began a refinement and revision process of the LEA Tool. We aimed to honor the original practitioner lens and simultaneously construct a tool based upon a robust theoretical framework. We drew on a framework for educational equity that focuses on the source of the persistent racial disparities in U.S. public education: the intersection of "economic disparities, asymmetrical power relations, and historically racialized practices" that have created the current inequitable system (Gutiérrez & Jaramillo, 2006; Crossland, 2004, as cited in Gutiérrez & Jaramillo, 2006). This framework distinguishes equity considerations from a discourse of equal opportunity, or a "sameness as fairness" principle that undergirds color-blind, "merit"-based reforms. Instead, an equity framework addresses the historical and current structures that created and sustain inequities and argues for "the use of students' complete linguistic, sociocultural, and academic repertoires in learning processes and events" (Gutierrez & Jaramillo, 2006, p. 180). Furthermore, such a framework challenges educational leaders – as part of the dominant structure – to recognize their own complicity in upholding inequities through traditional management practices (Gutiérrez, 2005/2006). We applied this theoretical lens to the elements of the six licensure standards, building rubrics for each standard that would identify what equitable leadership practice looks like at different proficiency levels, from unsatisfactory to exemplary.

3. Methods

This study builds on the previous work of the OLN. Our 2-year, iterative mixed-

methods development cycle brings theory together with practitioner language to revise,
test, and refine the LEA in three phases: 1) Development and initial refinement; 2) Small-
scale pilot and focus groups; and 3) OLN Institute sorting and alignment study.
Revisions after each phase resulted in a refined, guided self-assessment tool covering all
six leadership standards that will be available online at the OLN website.

In Phase 1, a "writing team" of school leaders, researchers, and equity experts
engaged in iterative qualitative data analyses to elaborate a developmental continuum
for equity leadership practices. The team inductively sorted and coded the original
practitioner statements and then deductively applied the existing research literature and
theory to modify and align the statements with four proficiency levels within each
element.

In Phase 2, we conducted a small-scale pilot of the Standard 1 rubric (Visionary
Leadership for Equity) with principal mentors and first or second-year principal mentees
from three OLN districts. Mentor-mentee pairs were asked to assess the mentee's equity
practices and use the data to dialogue about such practices. We subsequently conducted
separate focus group interviews with four mentors and five mentees about their
experiences using the tool.

In Phase 3, attendees at a 2010 OLN Institute completed a sorting and alignment
study for Standards 1 and 2 (Visionary Leadership for Equity and Instructional
Improvement for Equity). For the sorting task, we presented all statements from a
standard at random and asked participants to match each statement with the correct
element and proficiency level. For the alignment task, participants completed the rubric
for one standard (half of the participants were assigned Standard 1, and half Standard 2).

They rated themselves from unsatisfactory to exemplary on each element and provided supporting evidence for each rating. Writing team members analyzed the data to identify problematic items, inform efforts to better distinguish proficiency level descriptions, and examine alignment between participants' ratings and their cited evidence.

4. Data sources, evidence, objects or materials

In Phase 1, the practitioner statements from the 2007 work constituted the primary data, in conjunction with a literature review. In Phase 2, data consisted of completed rubrics, audio recordings and detailed fieldnotes of two 60-90 minute focus group interviews. The OLN Institute sorting and alignment study in Phase 3 drew on quantitative and qualitative survey data from 180 Oregon educators.

5. Results

Key findings, described below, emerged from each phase. We incorporated these findings into subsequent revisions to the tool.

Phase 1. Development and Initial Refinement

The initial work of the "writing team" focused on defining the developmental continuum of equity leadership. As the original four proficiency levels – beginning, emerging, proficient, and exemplary – lacked clear distinctions and definitions, the writing team defined the levels to encompass the entire continuum, from a lack of equity awareness and tacit support of the status quo to deep collaboration to embed ongoing inquiry cycles into the fabric of the school. For example, the group decided to rename "beginning" as "unsatisfactory," in alignment with Lindsey, Robins & Terrell's (2003) contention that practices that uphold the status quo constitute a proactively destructive

stance in a developmental continuum of social competence. In contrast, the exemplary

level was defined to provide a vision towards exemplary practice, recognizing the

practices might be aspirational for the vast majority of administrators. This

incorporated, for example, the educational leader's use of authority and power. At the

unsatisfactory level, the leader engages in unilateral decision-making and treats staff,

students, parents, and community members as incidental or as obstacles to her or his

work. Whereas at the exemplary level, the leader builds capacity of staff, students,

parents, and community members to engage in meaningful collaboration and shares

power and decision-making about the equity work. Leaders at this level understand

leadership as an organizational phenomenon spread across the school, multiple roles and

people (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Ogawa & Bossert, 1995).

Phase 2. Small-Scale Pilot Study

Focus group interview data from the pilot with principal mentor-mentee pairs

suggested the need to make educational jargon and academic terms from the research

literature more accessible to practitioners or those new to an equity lens. For example,

the tool originally highlighted critical race theory as an example of a theory that might

inform vision development, but the vast majority of mentors and mentees were unfamiliar

with the theory and therefore had difficulty selecting a level to describe their practice.

Focus group interviews also suggested the need for additional definitions and resources

for all who engage with the tool. The leaders highlighted the potential of the tool for

guiding professional practice and growth. However, many of the mentees and even

mentors (seasoned administrators) expressed a desire for additional resources, examples,

and definitions to support their growth along the continuum, and we plan to populate the

tool with electronically hyper-linked resources and case studies to aid in guided self-reflection and development.

Phase 3. OLN Sorting and Alignment Study

Following our initial revisions and piloting, we sought to gather larger-scale data on the construct validity of the tool. The survey from the 2010 OLN institute provided us with a first test of validity for the Standard 1 and 2 rubrics.

Sorting task. Out of 48 rubric statements across the two standards, more than 70% of OLN study participants correctly matched the statement with the element of the standard in 81% of the cases. Participants experienced greater challenge matching statements to the correct proficiency level (54% of the statements were matched incorrectly by >30% of the participants).

Statements where >30% of participants matched the content or level incorrectly prompted modification. Our analysis indicated participants had most trouble differentiating between the proficient and exemplary levels (with 22 of the 26 items at >30% incorrect matching at these levels). Also, elements 1.1 (Vision Content) and 2.2 (Providing Inclusive and Effective Instruction) were unclear or lacked construct validity (7 of the 9 items at >30% incorrect matching were from these elements). This led us to clarify content in 1.1 and 2.2 and use more consistent language to describe practices within the proficient and exemplary levels while more clearly distinguishing between these levels.

Alignment task. Participants then rated their own practice on either Standard 1 or Standard 2. Less than 3% of participants rated themselves as unsatisfactory in any category. Most rated themselves as proficient, and to a lesser extent, emerging or

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exemplary. However, our analysis of the evidence that participants provided to support

their rating often did not align with the level definitions. For example, participants who

selected "exemplary" for their self-assessed rating provided evidence lacking reference

to the leaders' engagement of parents and community members, though this was one of

the listed "exemplary" characteristics. We surmise this misalignment was due in part to

the tendency of educators to want to be "proficient" and a need for further tool

refinement but also in part to the lack of administrators' awareness about equitable

leadership practice. We subsequently revised the tool to articulate evidence leaders

should demonstrate at the proficient and exemplary levels in each element.

 At the time of this submission, Standards 1.0-3.0 are complete and ready for

further validation (See Table 1 for example).

Table 1. Sample Element from Leadership for Equity Assessment

2.2 PROVIDING INCLUSIVE AND EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION			
	UNSATISFACTORY (Takes no action or limited action to address inequities)	**EMERGING** (Begins to examine, plan, and initiate actions to address inequities)	**PROFICIENT** (Takes consistent action for change in school policies and practices for equity)	**EXEMPLARY** (Institutionalizes school policies and practices for equity and has evidence of more equitable student outcomes)

2.2ARIG

O R	The leader has not examined whether students have different access to rigorous content and pedagogy across courses and within classrooms. He/she provides little or no oversight over instructional rigor.	The leader acknowledges that students have inequitable access to rigorous content and pedagogy across courses and within classrooms. Using this lens, he/she begins to monitor instruction.	The leader engages staff in recognizing that students have inequitable access to rigorous content and pedagogy across courses and within classrooms. He/she consistently monitors instruction with an equity lens and helps build teacher capacity to address inequities.	Collaborating with school and district staff, families and the community, the leader institutionalizes policies and practices to ensure equitable access to rigorous content and pedagogy across courses and within classrooms. The leader's monitoring of instruction provides evidence that rigorous content and pedagogy are offered throughout the school.

Standards 4.0-6.0 will be completed before April 2012. The revised standards will be made available online to gather additional validity/reliability data and set the stage for future predictive validity investigations.

6. Scientific or scholarly significance of the study or work

The Leadership for Equity Assessment takes up Wallace's (2009) call to bring standards to life by applying them in a practice-based, theory-driven leadership assessment. Moreover, the tool focuses squarely on principal leadership for equity and articulates the shift needed to move leaders from a space of complacency and belief in "sameness as fairness" (Gutierrez & Jaramillo, 2006) to a deeply rooted, collectively owned equity culture, "organized around…practices that are simultaneously race-conscious and equity-oriented" (p. 174). Given the pervading inequities in our educational system that marginalize students of color and non-dominant groups, the

articulation of this shift, coupled with support to help leaders achieve this equity culture,

seems imperative.

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