Making Preparation Practical: Reducing Aspiring Administrator Time to Competence Through Five Types of Leaderly Thinking

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Abstract: California faces an increasing shortage of well-prepared, competent school leaders. These future instructional leaders will be required to play critical roles to assure the success of the schools they will lead. San Diego State University, in collaboration with three partner school districts in the region, developed the *five types of leaderly thinking model* to represent a leader's integration and application of the broad and disparate knowledge required to successfully lead a school. The model was designed to scaffold the design of administrative credential courses that accurately reflect the realities of school leadership. In doing so, the partners intend to provide candidates with experiences that reflect a leader's true work and, through authentic, practice-based learning experience, reduce the new administrator's time to competence. This article presents the five types of thinking and highlights the implementation of this model into the preparation program. Additionally, it provides ideas to guide the model's application in school district-based professional development applications.

The need for well-prepared, school-ready school leaders has never been greater. The impact that school leaders have on both teacher performance and student achievement has been well-established in the research (Hattie & Yates, 2014; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). Faced with a shortage of well-prepared school leaders, the State of California is working to increase the pipeline of qualified educators. Universities play a critical role in this effort. Many aspiring leaders turn to local institutions of higher education to complete coursework leading to the preliminary administrative services credential (Tier 1).

Historically, administration preparation has revolved around various tasks and experiences, what some have called "random acts of administrivia." For example, tasks often include attending a board meeting, shadowing a sitting administrator, or interviewing a principal about her budget. While they highlight some aspects of an administrator's job, these checklist-driven approaches have failed to prepare leaders for a seat in the principal or assistant principal's chair. Assistant principals have observed the challenges realized at this first placement. Bohn (2013) described some common challenges to include misconceptions about the demands of the role and inaccurate expectations that any one program can systematically solve a given problem. Beam, Claxton, and Smith (2016) found that new administrators differed from their more experienced peers in the areas of navigating politics and gaining a sense of credibility. Experienced principals, contributing to the same study, expressed a desire to have been more successfully adjusted to their assigned schools' cultures. Another study pressed assistant principals to reflect upon their early experiences to identify common themes related to their success. Findings of this research identified completing informal leadership experiences and volunteering to experience various aspects of the principalship as important precursors that align with success upon placement in their first formal position (Craft, Malveaux, Lopez, & Combs, 2016). These findings describe the early experiences of new administrators. They indicate the importance of understanding both the school and the principalship within the context of the system and the need for more than mere competency across isolated skills. But the question remains: How can we provide aspiring administrators with relevant models and experiences that best reflect the realities of a school leader's job?

San Diego State University's educational leadership faculty, working in concert with district leaders,

explored this question. Together, we worked to develop and implement a framework that models the types of thinking a successful leader employs. The resulting model represents five domains of leaderly thinking. By necessity, this "thinking" framework sits on top of the six California Administrator Performance Expectations (CAPEs; California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2017). This positioning reflects on-the-job application and integration of the CAPEs, which is accomplished through the five types of leaderly thinking.

The overarching intent was to close the gap between preparation and application through purposeful integration and modeling of leaderly thinking across each of the nine courses the preliminary credential program involves. In developing and applying this model, our faculty sought to reduce the timeline to competency and provide a cadre of ready administrators with demonstrated skills and abilities that more closely match the principalship realities.

Towards a Model of Leaderly Thinking

With funding from the Wallace Foundation, the faculty engaged in a comprehensive curriculum review throughout 2017. This review was accomplished in collaboration with partners from Chula Vista Elementary School District, San Diego Unified School District, and Sweetwater Union High School District, along with current administrators who are program graduates. While available data gained through placement figures and the California State University exit survey indicated high levels of satisfaction with their preparation program, faculty sought to heighten identified strengths and sharpen course outcomes and pedagogy—all with an eye to application. Our need for this work was also driven by the impending California Administrator Performance Assessment (CalAPA). Passing the CalAPA will become a new, statewide requirement for all individuals seeking the preliminary services credential in 2019. It involves assessments in the areas of data analysis and planning, collaborative professional learning facilitation, and individual teacher coaching. This additional requirement, and the authentic approach it employs, pressed the faculty to intentionally focus on the integration and application of previously addressed, disparate skills. As a result, we developed and pilot tested, through course integration, a model that elaborates the five types of thinking a school leader employs (see center of Figure 1).

These types of thinking represent the successful combination and application of the six CAPEs, with systems thinking being an element that necessarily

unites a leader's simultaneous performance in multiple domains. These do not represent a comprehensive set of standards, but rather the thinking that overlies all of the standards. They do highlight a gap in the ways in which future leaders have historically been educated. These ways of thinking, and the standards that are connected and applied by engaging in this type of thinking, have guided syllabus revisions and development, as well as local performance assessments of candidates' knowledge, skills, and dispositions presented in these program review documents. The redesigned administrative services credential curriculum was implemented for the first time in the 2017-18 academic year.

Five Types of Leaderly Thinking

The team worked to define the role of the principal. University faculty, central office leaders, and sitting principals met several times to identify the work of a school leader. Over several full-day sessions, we listed a wide range of tasks, behaviors, dispositions, and actions that needed to occur for the principal to be successful. As we began to cluster these ideas, we realized that although many of them were represented in the standards, there were others that were not as clearly articulated. We then grouped and re-grouped the statements and ended with five areas. We next worked to name and define each area. Our first draft was then presented to an expert panel that included professors of educational leadership from other universities and sitting superintendents. This critical friend group provided our team with feedback and ideas for consideration as we worked to revise our emerging expectations. The team met again to address the recommendations of our critical friends and produce our second version, which was subsequently sent out for external review and comment by professors, partner district leaders, and sitting principals. Based on feedback received from this second round of reviews, our team met again to revise our model.

The university-district-alumni team's efforts resulted in five domains of leaderly thinking. The center of Figure 1 presents these five areas, which are the result of a candidate applying the six CAPEs and the resulting supporting standards under each of these six expectations. These six CAPEs are represented as the model's outermost regions. The team deliberately placed *systems thinking* central in the model to reflect the reality that it is systems that tie everything together. Indeed, without recognition that every action taken and decision made has systemic effects, leadership is compromised. Certainly, this reality is echoed in the challenges faced by emerging leaders, as defined in the studies cited earlier.
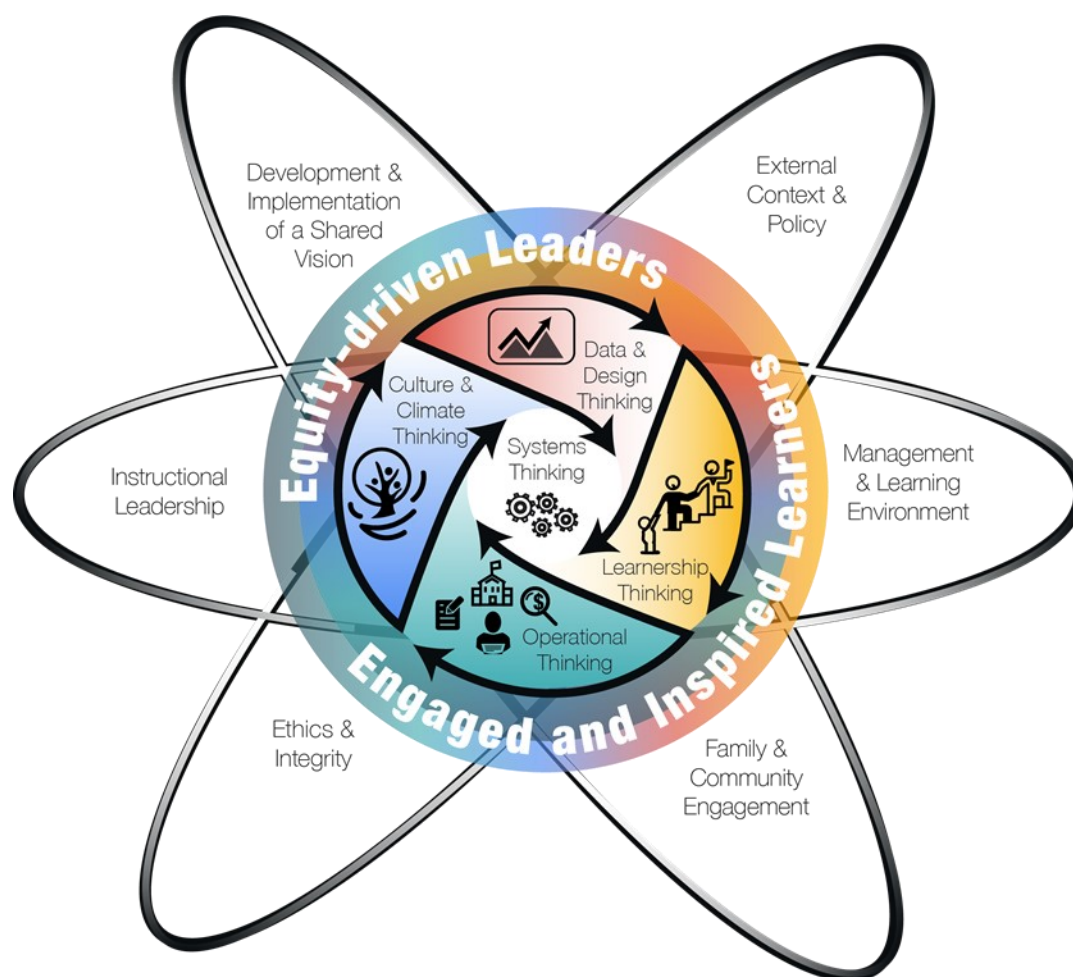
Figure 1. Leaderly thinking model, integrated with CAPEs as the outermost elements.

Preparation programs, whether university- or district-based, should be encouraged to reflect upon the application of taught skills. Below we share the five types of leaderly thinking definitions as a best practice in incorporating application into the training that prospective leaders complete. For each, we offer a central statement about ability, central questions that drive a leader's thinking, and potential performances that are indicative of success. We think of these as the habits of mind or dispositions necessary for effective school leadership.

Culture and Climate Thinking

A *culture and climate thinker* must have the ability to (1) understand and positively influence the current state of the school culture and climate and (2) drive collaborative actions and relational leadership. Culture and climate thinkers ask several key questions:

- How can I assess the school's *feel* to students, staff, families, and the community to guide decision-making, resulting in a positive culture and climate?

- What systems do I have in place to continuously improve the climate and culture of the school?

- How do I insist that gaps in learning opportunities are eliminated?

- How is the school an emotionally and physically safe place for everyone?

- As a *dream manager*—one who is helping students and staff achieve their dreams—how do I help others realize their aspirations?

Indicators of successful performance.

1. Assess the current condition as it relates to student voice and learning, educator learning, growth-producing relationships, and stakeholder perceptions.

2. Identify and rally students and others stakeholders into the process of defining and operationalizing an inclusive school mission and vision focused on student success.

3. Through appreciative inquiry, address gaps

between the shared school mission and vision and current state of the school climate and culture as central to inclusive school improvement processes (LCAP, SPSA, WASC).

4. Recognize, confront, interrupt, address without apology, and educate others about the dynamics of inequity, racism, bias, prejudice, discrimination, and bullying.

5. Tap the aspirations of, and ignite and guide the actualization of, students' and educators' goals and dreams by cultivating student, teacher, parent, and community growth-producing relationships.

Data and Design Thinking

A *data and design thinker* must have the ability to (1) access and interpret diverse forms of data to identify existing equity gaps and iteratively design programs, products, and initiatives and (2) inform decisions that contribute to optimal learning conditions for all. Data and design thinkers ask several key questions:

- What can I know through reliable data sources to inform the decisions I make?

- How can I encourage calculated risk through a process of innovation?

- Am I demonstrating a commitment to sustained inquiry and the iterative improvement of our programs, products, and initiatives to ensure all learners are able to perform at the ambitious academic levels needed to succeed in school and community?

Indicators of successful performance.

1. Recognize the diverse range of qualitative and quantitative data available within an educational system—including the full range of data to represent student voice, and then interpret and present that data by making it accessible, relevant, and persuasive to diverse audiences.

2. Collaboratively analyze reliable and valid data to understand contextual factors for the purpose of identifying strengths, existing equity-gaps, and opportunities and needs and proposing actions and/or solutions with predictable results, ensuring that data are used to prioritize actions, monitor impact, and adjust approaches.

3. Understand how a design-thinking approach is used to innovate—including tasks of defining, researching, ideating, prototyping, selecting, implementing, and learning—and improve the quality of the educational experience for all students.

4. Using data as an input, work iteratively to address a need or opportunity through solution system design, formative action monitoring, and refinement cycles to optimize our shared vision of engaged, inspired, and successful learners.

Learnership Thinking

A *learnership thinker* first creates the conditions and opportunities for all adults and students to learn and perform at ambitious, academic levels to achieve in school and life. This type of thinker then utilizes instructional leadership practices that are driven by the belief that students and adult voice are both an input and an outcome. The development team specifically noted that conversation typically revolves around leadership thinking, when, in reality, the ultimate outcome should be thinking that is squarely focused on learners and learning. We signal this with the neologism *learnership*, which places the emphasis more accurately.

Learnership thinkers ask several key questions:

- How do my leadership practices maximize student and adult learning?

- How am I nurturing the growth and capacity of each individual to reach his/her fullest potential?

- How do I demonstrate the attributes of an equity-driven lead learner?

Indicators of successful performance.

1. Demonstrate leadership thinking and practices that are evidence based, strength based, and growth producing.

2. Increase high-impact, culturally responsive instructional practices across learning environments that result in engaged, inspired, and successful learners.

3. Continuously analyze current conditions in student engagement, instructional practices, curriculum, and assessment to provide actionable feedback about our teaching, leadership, and student learning.

4. Build collaborative structures for adults and students that develop leadership capacity and include differentiated, personalized learning, and opportunities for ongoing self and group reflective practices to strengthen the collective efficacy of the community of learners.

5. Consider adult and student input and output in instructional practices, curriculum, and assessments within the context of the school or district's

mission and vision.

Operational Thinking

An *operational thinker* must have the ability to (1) orchestrate equitable, fair, legal, honest, ethical practices to promote student voice and (2) create spaces for shared decision making and stakeholder influence. Operational thinkers ask several key questions:

- In what ways do decisions impact teaching and learning and foster equity?

- Whose counsel should I seek regarding operational decisions?

- Who are the obviously affected and possibly overlooked stakeholders in decisions and actions?

- What are the unintended consequences of decisions?

Indicators of successful performance.

1. Use an equity and ethical frame when making decisions in the fiscal, personnel, legal, governance, operational, and facilities domains.

2. Solicit input or counsel from all relevant stakeholders before enacting decision making related to these domains and communicate in ways that all stakeholders can understand and enact.

3. Ensure that procedures and processes in these domains contribute positively to the teaching and learning lives of all adults and students.

4. Proactively align the organization's mission and vision with these domains to create the conditions necessary to foster student voice and equitable outcomes.

Systems Thinking

Systems thinkers must have the ability to (1) conceptualize schools as complex organizations comprised of a network of dynamic and interdependent thinking components, (2) pursue school change and improvement through systemic change and capacity building, and (3) create and articulate a shared vision of a school as a place where all students are fully engaged, inspired, empowered, and heard. Again, the central placement of systems thinking is used to indicate its connection to each of the other four types of leaderly thinking. Systems are the means through which change is initiated, facilitated, and accomplished and by which performance is realized. Systems thinkers ask several key questions:

- How do I conceptualize my organization as a system with internal and external influences?

- How do I tie types of thinking together to pursue school change and improvement through systemic change?

- How do I adapt my leadership when circumstances require changes in the *what*, *why*, or *how* things need to be done?

- How does our vision to promote every student's voice drive our long-term and short-term strategic thinking and execution?

- How do I articulate and model beliefs about the value of every student's voice as a critical element to educational outcomes?

Indicators of successful performance.

1. Apply systems thinking to create and articulate a shared vision of a school as a place where all students are empowered and their voices are heard. In doing so, leaders understand and value governance and political systems, using this knowledge to operate within legal and ethical parameters.

2. Apply systems thinking to articulate, manage, and impact the *thinking* components and leverage their interrelationships. Equity-driven leaders regularly review and reflect on their performance and evaluate their actions and their collective impact on teaching and learning.

3. Apply systems thinking to articulate a theory of action to manage the system and its thinking components. The theory of action should represent a balance between deploying technical knowledge of the organization with a means to adapt and integrate relevant practices.

4. Apply equity-driven systems thinking by demonstrating the theory of action in practice while building a trusting and collaborative climate.

5. Apply systems thinking to all decisions, recognizing that decisions have ethical implications as well as the potential to foster equity for all students.

Integrating Thinking Experiences into the Preparation Program

The model manifests itself throughout the nine-course preparation program. For example, during a previous version of the school improvement class, students analyzed data from a composite, or "mock" school, that was crafted by the professor. This allowed the faculty members to predetermine the "correct" answers and ensure that students were correctly analyzing data to

identify gaps and then develop plans to address the identified needs. In our re-design, students analyze data from their own school and engage groups of peers in an advisory group function. The aspiring administrator must guide the team through the analysis and development of a plan. Then the team must implement the plan and monitor its success, making changes along the way.

This revised assignment requires future administrators to engage in data and design thinking as a primary focus, and it provides them with practice engaging in the other types of leaderly thinking. In addition to data and design, the aspiring administrator focuses on learnership, meaning that they attend to student learning rather than simply teacher actions. In far too many cases, "instructional leadership" is limited to teachers actions rather than the impact that it has on students. In addition, the data analysis requires consideration of gaps in student performance, and candidates must think about culture and climate issues as well as how to mobilize resources (operational thinking) and how the decisions they make will impact the school as a system. For example, if they recommend an after-school intervention, we assess the degree to which they have considered union issues, transportation challenges, communication with families, equity in eligibility, and notification of support staff to be prepared for inquiry calls or emails about the program. In other words, this revised task provides the candidate and faculty with an opportunity to assess the development of thinking habits as well as task performance.

The *equity walk* is another example of a new assignment that challenges students to apply their leaderly thinking in multiple areas. Here, aspiring administrators engage in structured observation of learning at their school site. The equity walk is accomplished in collaboration with their clinical practice mentor. Together, they walk the school, visiting classrooms and shared spaces, making observations and discussing all aspects of the school. While observations historically have focused on teaching, our equity walks expand the focus and reflect the true systemic nature of a successful school's program. For example, equity is considered with regard to accessible instruction and opportunities for learning. But this assignment also investigates evidence of an equitable climate and culture throughout the school, equitable access to and use of data to inform all aspects of the school's operation, and equality of operations to include classroom physical space and resources. It also requires that the candidate identify the learning that occurred rather than just the teaching that was observed. By applying

the five types of leaderly thinking, the equity walk becomes a true audit of the school's supports specific to providing learning for all students. It challenges our candidates to think systemically to recognize how the school's work and ultimate success require deliberate attention and planning in multiple areas that include, but expand beyond, teaching.

Ultimately, candidates must demonstrate competency of the CAPEs and the five types of leaderly thinking. Historically, students completed an exit exam with a faculty member and a community member that consisted of an interview in which the candidate was asked about the coursework and then provided with an opportunity to reflect on his or her school improvement efforts. While this offered opportunities for faculty to confirm synthesis of thinking, it was largely retrospective in nature and, therefore, did not require students to engage in reactive, real-time decision making and planning. In the coming academic year, our exit exam will shift to a scenario-driven, group practice that requires candidates to engage with one another and, provided data, to process a given problem, determine a course of action, and make a resolution recommendation to the faculty — supported with their rationale. This new approach provides students with the opportunity to showcase the five types of leaderly thinking, as they consider the given problem's multiple dimensions, consider systemic, and even iatrogenic, aspects of any potential course of action, and justify their recommendations.

Conclusion

Working together, San Diego State University's faculty and district partners developed the five types of leaderly thinking. Our intent was to develop closer alignment between the preliminary administrative credential curriculum and the required skills, knowledge, and dispositions of a practicing school administrator. Increasing the relevance of our curriculum, we believed, would result in aspiring administrators who were better prepared for their first day on the job. Program evaluation, already underway, is investigating the implementation and impact of this model in our preliminarily administrative services credentialing coursework.

This article has presented the results of our work, as well as the process employed, in an effort to expand the conversation around leader preparation and performance. Our intent is to encourage further reflection. This includes reflection not only on the skills and knowledge required by leaders, but equally on how the broad range of skills and knowledge comes together, integrates, and becomes successfully applied

by leaders. For principal preparation programs, we encourage thoughtful reflection and intentional design around the progression from new knowledge and skills to application in the school setting. For district leadership, the model can inform the ongoing development of leaders at any career stage.

At present, our district partners are in the early stages of applying the model and its five components to scaffold both professional development plans and training programs for early-stage and established leaders. In addition, principal review instruments are being reimagined with the goal of documenting the applied, integrated thinking that the model represents.

With deliberate practice in each of the five types of leaderly thinking, our goal is to reduce time to competence and support an increased pipeline of job-ready future school leaders. The five types of leaderly thinking model is this collaborative team's initial step toward this ultimate goal.

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