

A Response To Brian Brent

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I am not surprised with Brent's conclusion that "graduate training in educational administration has no significant positive influence on school effectiveness." I was trained in the Social Science paradigm at the University of Wisconsin; but, when I became a principal, I relied on the teachings of my mother more than those of my professors, several of whom were pioneers in the social science movement. She taught me: (1) treat others as you want to be treated; (2) young people learn by watching adults; (3) it is better to give than to receive, etc. In other words, my experience coincides with the view that school leadership is a moral art, not a social science.

I will not argue against Brent's basic premise that we ought to question the efficacy of educational administration graduate programs. Instead, I will argue that, because school administration is more art than social science, we ought to adopt a principal preparation metaphor based on the arts, not on social science.

Brent's "Implications for Policy" section illustrates the importance of this distinction and this new metaphor. In that section, Brent posits two possibilities. The first is that "there is nothing systematic or regular about a principal's duties. It is the principal's responsibility to make sense out of his or her unique reality and discover ways to carry, out the charge." The second is that the principal's role is not so idiosyncratic, and graduate training provides an opportunity for professors to help graduate students gain the skills and knowledge they will need as school administrators.

The first possibility is closest to the truth. The principal's role is idiosyncratic, and it is up to the individual "to make sense out of his or her unique reality." Because I use an art metaphor for preparing principals, however, I do not conclude, as Brent does, that therefore "there is nothing to be learned from the experience of others, including professors of educational administration." If we use an art metaphor, the idiosyncratic nature of the principalship is taken for granted. It is part of its beauty, not a limitation to be overcome by social scientists in search of some "correct" way to prepare school administrators.

Instead, I propose that we use a performing arts metaphor for principal preparation programs. Our students are musicians studying to become orchestra conductors. The question we all must confront is, when they become the conductors, whose music will they play? If they want to conduct their own symphony, our preparation programs must provide the opportunity to write it.

In this metaphor, the orchestra is the faculty our graduate students will face someday, and the symphony is the body of ideas the graduate students develop as they think about how to develop an effective school. Just as musicians study music traditions, principles, and theory in order to write a symphony, that is pleasing and effective, educational administration students read and reflect on school leadership literature, discuss issues

with their classmates, and write reports and reflections to express their vision of how to build an effective school.

Later, when these students are employed as principals, their visions are modified and adjusted to fit their schools. This is as it should be. The efforts that go into becoming an effective principal do not end in graduate school classrooms they begin there. They begin with ideas, questions, and understanding. These are the things that professors of educational administration can help students accomplish in the graduate school classroom, even though each principalship is unique.

So, how does this metaphor change the ways we prepare school leaders? How does it affect the ways we determine the efficacy of this training?

First, it is important to note that effectiveness in both conducting an orchestra and leading a school depend a great deal on style, attitude, tone, and philosophy. Although these elements are neutralized in the social science model of principal preparation, in the performing arts metaphor they are a focus. Those who listen to the orchestra appreciate that style is integral to the beauty of the music. Likewise, those who have been principals or who have studied principals recognize that style, attitude, tone, and philosophy often determine effectiveness. Graduate school classes in educational administration are an appropriate time for aspiring principals to begin to understand how these elements influence the symphony they are writing and the ways they will conduct the orchestra.

Second, in keeping this metaphor in mind, it is clear that a high level of technical, human, and conceptual skills and knowledge ought to be requirements for those ENTERING the program. Just as we would recruit only highly regarded musicians to become conductors, we must enroll only respected, accomplished educators in educational administration programs. And this metaphor may suggest a different picture of the person we want to enroll in school administration. Instead of someone with a high GRE score, we would recruit teachers with a mature educational philosophy, a well-developed sense of their own style, a sincere dedication to improving education, and the creativity needed to write a pleasing symphony and effectively conduct the orchestra. This is similar to the basis for admitting graduate students in the arts.

Third, this metaphor can help students understand how graduate school classes are essential elements of their preparation for the principalship. Hypothesizing, discussing, and reflecting enable them to write their own symphony. This is necessary if they are going to conduct the orchestra and share the music only they can write.

Finally, adopting a performing arts metaphor would change the way we assess the efficacy of our training programs. Clearly, we would look for different things. Instead of trying to determine how our graduates' behaviors matched some set of standards, we would talk with teachers, parents, and students about the beauty of the ways in which the administrator takes his or her own unique situation and builds something positive and effective. In this way we would rely more on criticism, or what Eisner calls "connoisseurship" to determine efficacy of our programs.

It is no wonder that Brent concludes, “graduate training in educational administration has no significant positive influence on school effectiveness.” We are looking for the wrong things because we have adopted the wrong metaphor.

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