

A Preliminary Study: Using a Case Study to Prepare Potential Educational Leaders for Collaboration in Leading Cultural Inclusiveness

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This study explored the experiences of learners as part of a university educational leadership program course activity. Learners chose collaborative learning in solving a real-world problem and in developing a collective plan of action to better tackle school and community cultural inclusiveness. Observational protocols, group interviews and reflections of 13 graduate-level potential educational leaders made up the data. The findings revealed that collaboration proved beneficial in improving skills in cultural responsiveness and cultural sensitivity. Moreover, leaders learned ways to set aside personal agendas and focus on their institutional goals to better manage cultural barriers to the success of their students.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this preliminary study was to get an insight of the experiences of potential educational leaders who used collaborative learning to analyze a case study to solve a real world problem. The process helped learners improve their content knowledge and professional leadership skills in becoming culturally more responsive and sensitive, and be better equipped in leading cultural inclusiveness in educational settings and communities.

In this study the term *educational leadership* was used broadly covering all levels of leadership positions in K-12 school settings to include building leaders (principals), assistant building leaders, supervisors, curriculum directors, etc. The term also included district leaders (superintendents) since the study was related to professional leadership skills in cultural inclusiveness.

The selected course was on cultural diversity, and was offered online at the college of education of a mid-western public university as part of the advanced programs at the master and specialist level that prepared leaders for positions in school building environments. Both course content and assessment were developed in compliance with the *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders* (National Policy Board for Educational Administration [NPBEA], 2015), and the *Educational Leadership Program Recognition Standards: Building Level* (NPBEA, 2011). Throughout the years, changes in NPBEA were also reflected in the course activities.

The virtual class was designed as an interactive laboratory to prepare culturally more responsive and sensitive educators who would manage cultural barriers and promote inclusiveness in educational settings due to “the growing diversity of students, their families, and communities” (NPBEA, 2011, p. 45). The course also included activities for learners to develop their cultural competence as “cultural competence across a broad spectrum of constituents is viewed as critical to building a welcoming environment for learning in schools and at home” (NPBEA, 2011, p. 45).

The online class included 27 adult learners enrolled in various educational programs at masters and specialist levels; however, the study only included data from the 13 learners who were pursuing an advanced degree in educational leadership. The experiences of the learners indicated that developing a plan of action in compliance with the professional standards was fundamental since “standards have direct influence on members of the profession by creating expectations and setting directions for the practice of educational leaders (NPBEA, 2011, p. 5). In addition, solving a real-world problem collaboratively with appropriate implementation strategies was an effective way to become culturally more sensitive and responsive social actors paving the way to lead cultural inclusiveness. The findings revealed that working collaboratively in groups helped improve members’ content knowledge, leadership skills, and attitudes in a) building dialogues by collaboration; b) making sense of data on cultural differences; c) confidently handling conflicts related to diversity; d) learning how to communicate more effectively; and e) working towards *collective efficacy* (Levi, 2001) rather than personal agendas.

The potential leaders also felt more confident and became more aware of the importance of supporting collaborative processes to better understand and manage cultural diversity and inclusiveness. Findings also confirmed that for a seamless transition it was essential to build a strong link between leadership preparation programs and the real world by means of offering a course design which ensured the following three dimensions based on NPBEA (2011) standards: “1. Awareness – acquiring concepts, information, definitions and procedures 2. Understanding – interpreting, integrating and using knowledge and skills 3. Application – apply knowledge and skills to new or specific opportunities or problems” (p. 6).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Current Challenges

Shifting demographics, unprecedented societal changes, significant increases in immigration patterns, and the refugee crises all create a domino effect in school settings throughout the U.S. The fact that educators’ relationships in the classrooms and with their institutions are becoming more short-lived and segregated is only one of the side effects. This stark reality is a constant reminder that university educational programs need to be continuously reassessed and readjusted to better respond to the needs of schools and communities. Universities also need to prepare these potential leaders not only for foreseeable challenges but also for unforeseeable challenges since “life as a school leader requires the use of specialized skills within the context of often ambiguous, demanding, and interconnected events” (NPBEA, 2011, p. 6).

The United States Census Bureau (2016) projections regarding the birth of more minority babies coupled with an increase in immigration crises continue to affect the landscape of cultural diversity training in university educational leadership programs. There is ample literature that reveals gaps in educational leadership and teacher education preparation programs, and the realities of the K-12 institutions and classrooms in the U.S. (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007; Franklin Torrez & Krebs, 2012). In fact, the recent discussions of the 2017 Climate Summit became the topic of the Official Blog of the U.S. Department of Education (Nerenberg, 2017), stressing the urgency to act: “if we do not change some of our practices to be more culturally responsive and engage all of our students in learning, we will be enabling this system to perpetuate, rather than disrupting it” (para. 3). The consensus was that educational professional programs needed to promote “well prepared, reflective, constant learners engaging in culturally responsive leadership” (Nerenberg, 2017, para. 4) since educators were the lead actors to “set the tone, the priorities....ensuring access to quality, engaging, rigorous, and relevant school experience” (para. 7).

For higher education stakeholders, acknowledging this gap is an obligation as is improving their professional educational leadership programs. According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) “the relative quality of leadership programs should be judged ultimately by the knowledge and skills of their graduates: by their capacity to engage effectively in the leadership practices....as well as other practices that promote school improvement and student learning” (p. 16). Moreover, such programs need to be

effectively connected to the realities of the communities as found by Howard-Hamilton, Cuyjet, and Cooper (2016): “the practical reality that multiculturalism is embedded in the social and systemic structure of our society should send a message of recognizing these differences and understanding the biases that could impede an individual’s process” (p. 13). A statement found in the 2011 NPBEA *Educational Leadership Program Recognition Standards: Building Level* validates the need to have quality programs since “schools and school districts need effective leaders like never before to take on the challenges and opportunities facing education today and in the future” (p. 7). As a result, “relentless connections to, and emphasis on, real or simulated school experiences in regard to resources, methods and assessments will greatly facilitate graduate’s ultimate success as a school leader” (NPBEA, 2011, p. 6).

Cultural Diversity Course Design

The definitions and competencies related to cultural diversity used throughout the course were based on both the professional standards for educational leaders (NPBEA, 2015), and the educational leadership program recognition standards (NPBEA, 2011). The *Educational Leadership Program Recognition Standards: Building Level* referred to cultural competence as “the ability of a leader to understand his/her own cultural background and values and work successfully with individuals of different cultures without engaging in deficit categorization of them” (NPBEA, 2011, p. 45). Cultural responsiveness was also clustered together with the mission, vision and core values, ethics and professional norms, and equity in the program recognition standards (NPBEA, 2011). In addition, the two concepts, *equity and cultural responsiveness*, included in the course activities derived from one standard which dictated that “effective educational leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student’s academic success and well-being” (NPBEA, 2015, p. 11).

The concept of collaboration in the course activities was particularly important as the word *collaboration* emerged throughout the standards (NPBEA, 2011, 2015) in many forms such as *collaborative school visioning*, *collaboration process*, *collaboration with stakeholders*, etc. The course activities also stressed the learning culture and included barriers that prevented student success which was spelled out throughout educational leadership preparation standards.

Communication also played a major part in the designing the course content and assessment since the foundation of managing cultural diversity rested in effective intercultural communication defined as “a process of playing out our identities by moving from rules to roles” (Klyukanov, 2005, p. 70). The notion of intercultural communication has a huge impact on educational leader, and the applications of this competency range from encouraging collaborative behaviors to building and sustaining positive learning environments, resulting in vast effects on student well-being and student achievement. Hence it is critical to equip educational leaders with the *Performativity Principle* (Klyukanov, 2005) formula which defined intercultural communication as “a reiterative process whereby people from different cultures enact meaning in order to accomplish their tasks” (Klyukanov, 2005, p. 71).

Another activity to include in a cultural diversity course design was to expose learners to real world problems by means of case studies, and to require that these cases be solved by teams which exercise collaboration resulting in *collective efficacy* (Levi, 2001). Such an activity better prepares educational leaders to manage culturally diverse settings to promote student success.

Regarding the learning objectives of the course, behavioral and cognitive learning objectives derived from Blooms Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), and cognitive levels of high-order thinking were incorporated into course goals, guidelines. In addition, the course materials were carefully selected and developed based on factual knowledge, conceptual knowledge, procedural knowledge and meta-cognitive knowledge (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Topics were presented in a progressive manner to engage learners in intergroup dialogues, leading to cooperativeness and collaboration. In addition, learners were prepared in *properties of conflict interaction* (Folger, Poole, & Stuttmann, 2001) and were equipped with a “range of tactics that can be used to enact conflicts” (p. 26).

Prior to the case study, course content and related activities were designed and scaffolded to lead learners to effectively undertake analyses, syntheses and reflections regarding real-life problems related to cultural differences and conflict interactions in the forms of discussion boards, blogs, wikis, and

reflections. Learners were prepared for the case study through discussion and reflection activities which included materials with topics like oppression, hatred, discrimination, equity, and social injustice, and how to handle these challenges. The reflection platforms fostered more exposure to a broad range of diverse experiences and covered factual and theoretical knowledge.

The behavioral learning outcomes demonstrated learners explaining and predicting effects of these violations which resulted in more awareness and understanding of the real-life issues like hatred, racism, violence, oppression (Howard-Hamilton, Richardson, & Shuford, 1998), and how to become more inclusive in order to prevent cultural barriers to learning. In addition, other learning objectives included exploring cultural competence attributes of learners themselves, and their institutions to make sense of real-life issues resulting in team member's sense of belonging. Furthermore, these activities encouraged learners to build and sustain collaborative behaviors (LaFasto & Larson, 2001).

Case Studies

With virtual colleges on the rise, and technology changing rapidly, 21st century learners are exposed to more innovative ways to tackle complex-problem solving. In this virtual course, a case study was defined as "similar to the types of problem that occur in real life. Such problems can be used....either individually or in groups, and may or may not be assessed" (Penn, Currie, Hoad, & O'Brien, 2016, p.16). The activity was "congruent with meta-cognitive approach to learning....focused [sic] on sense-making, self-assessment and reflection on what worked and what needs improving" (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000, p.12).

U.S. higher education programs have been using case studies in preparing learners for the real world since its introduction at Harvard Law School over hundred years ago, and today, case studies are employed beyond law, business, and medicine and have become effective teaching tools in preparing teachers for real-life problems (Kowalski, 2008; Merseth, 1999). Similarly, educational leadership professional programs offer complex, real world problems to equip educational professionals with tools to manage real-life issues in classrooms or their institutions. In fact, "...those involved in education have become increasingly aware that teachers who are ill-prepared for the ambiguity of real-life classrooms often leave the teaching profession quickly or fall" (Nath, 2005, p. 396).

According to Jonassen (1997), "the most commonly encountered problems, especially in schools and universities, are well-structured problems....[and] require the application of a finite number of concepts, rules, and principles being studied to a constrained problem situation"(p. 68). Progressing through these well-structured cases, learners "transcend their past experiences and not merely demonstrate knowledge but rather put themselves in a position to extend their knowledge" (Ferreira & Lacerda dos Santos, 2009, p. 173), resulting in moving through barriers, differentiation, and rigidity all of which add up to collaborative learning.

Additionally, problem solving as a case study is "a lot more conceptually engaging than memorization...and engages learners in understanding and resolving the issues rather than remembering them" (Jonassen, 2004, p. 17). In transferring theory into practice, when solving complex problems, thinking skills need to be based on factual knowledge (Donovan, Bransford, & Pellegrino, 1999) as "students' abilities to acquire organized sets of facts and skills are actually enhanced when they are connected to meaningful problem-solving activities, and when students are helped to understand why, when, and how those facts and skills are relevant" (p. 19).

In addition, forming small groups to sustain effective participation and communication in intergroup settings as part of a real-life complex problem solving process is vital since feedback becomes easier as stated by Scheidel and Crowell (1966): "feedback phenomena are often thought to represent the heart of the process of oral communication" (p. 271). Moreover, "being accepted as a full member of one's ethnic group implies demonstrations that communicate and authenticate membership" (Verkuyten, 2010, p. 20). In this case, being part of an educational leadership group was an important criterion which served as a common denominator for *identity confirmation* (Verkuyten, 2010) for successful interactions in building collaboration.

As the problem solving activity required group work, learners were instructed to research the differences and similarities of cooperative learning and collaborative learning prior to starting the task and taking the lead in deciding on how to proceed. Although the two terms were frequently used interchangeably, based on their search, learners opted for collaborative learning as the term was defined as “an unstructured, small group process that cultivates independence, free thinking, and dissent. The goal of the collaborative learning process is to have group members think about and solve abstract problems, problems that may have no specific answers, or multiple solutions” (Oliveras, 2007, p. 26). Cooperative learning, however, was defined as “a very structured process characterized by a high degree of individual accountability, positive member interdependence, and social skill development” (Oliveras, 2007, p. 26). As the group members were potential educational leaders, they noted that collaborative learning would be more applicable to their activity as well as their future educational settings, and the goals of their institutions. The consensus was that collaborative learning was not as structured and the process was not about “individual learning, or even necessarily group learning; rather...satisfy an organizational mandate, goal, or objective” (Oliveras, 2007, p. 30). Another factor affecting the decision of the learners was that the concept of collaboration was present throughout the standards and was a required professional leadership skill.

The case study presented in the course had been introduced by previous faculty members of department. The case was about a cultural conflict set in an educational setting and was about communication and power, and was related to “dominant culture groups attempt to perpetuate their positions of privilege in many ways” (Martin & Nagayama, 2007, p. 110). This was a typical case educational leaders would be exposed to in their educational settings. The activity presented learners with prompts, a detailed rubric, and instructions to take all standards into account, and develop tactics and strategies for effective problem solving, collaborative sense making (Putnam, 2010), and consensus decision making. The guidelines and rubric were based on the *Lundeberg Model* and *The Reflective Thinking Procedure* for decision making (Lundeberg, 1999; Scheidel & Crowell, 1979).

METHODOLOGY

To create a similar school building scenario, all 27 learners of different educational goals were included in the activity playing a major role. Learners all gave permission for the data to be used for the study. The mixed group dialogues resulted in *cross-fertilization* (Gratton & Erickson, 2007) which yielded rich data. A total five groups were formed. Three groups were made up of five members, and two groups were made up of six members. Data were collected from all 27 learners; however, the study included only the data from 13 learners who were potential educational leaders. The groups were formed based on their professional positions, gender, and experience. Each group had at least one potential leader. In addition, each member forming a group needed to be from a different school district to prevent “dominance and authority relations” (Folger, Poole, & Stutman, 2001, p. 191) serving as a barrier to group interactions. Gratton and Erickson (2007) found that “the higher the proportion of strangers on the team and greater the diversity and background and experience, the less likely the team members are to share knowledge or exhibit other collaborative behaviors” (para. 6).

The teams selected their own leaders. The leaders were instructed to ensure that their consensus decision making “uses all of a team’s resources fully, encourages support for implementation of decisions” (Levi, 2001, p. 167). Groups were instructed to identify and analyze the problem, and taking the standards into account, propose a plan of action with appropriate strategies for implementation. As a decision making strategy, the guidelines instructed learners to act like leaders using facts from the case. In addition, their plans of action needed to include clearly outlined steps designed to resolve the problem to promote an inclusive culture and to sustain success of all students.

During the process of working in teams, because learners had previous training in leadership, members felt prepared when it came to creating a *sense of cohesiveness* (Levi, 2001). In addition, group interactions demonstrated that *self-efficacy* was replaced by *collective efficacy* (Levi, 2001). The groups were instructed to wrap up the final stages of decision making by using per-set questions as stated by Levi

(2001): “Will you agree that this is what the team should do next? Can you go along with this position? Can you support this alternative?” (p. 167).

For observations, one person in the group volunteered to act as an observer to record the interactions and group dynamics of the groups to help identify the types of conflict resolution style the group used. The group observers used an activity worksheet by Levi (2001) and classified the responses of each member. The styles the groups used were classified as “avoidance, accommodation, confrontation, compromise, collaboration” (Levi, 2001, p. 131). Group members also took notes of the dynamics of their interactions; however, there was no recording of the interactions to prevent intimidation and to interrupt with the flow of the dialogues (Creswell, 2012).

Since the online course was offered via the Blackboard Learning Management System (2017), learners were exposed to multiple platforms to meet virtually including VoiceThread (2017), “a cloud application” which would help students “upload, share and discuss documents, presentations, images, audio files and videos” (para.1); Zoom (2017), “video conferencing, and web conferencing service” (para. 1); and Blackboard Collaborate (2017), “web conferencing software” (para.1). All three platforms were built into the Blackboard Learning Management System. Although groups had options related to the type of platform they preferred to use, all groups reported using a combination of the aforementioned platforms as they felt experienced and had been using these tools throughout their online program.

Regarding working in virtual teams, it was challenging to observe interactions when compared to a face-to-face environment (Walther & Carr, 2010). However, due to the recent advancements in information and communication technologies, members were able to “discern individual’s personalities by observing their physical appearances, vocal characteristics, and the behaviors they exhibit through rapid and reciprocal interactions” (Walther & Carr, 2010, p. 210) as if they were in a face to face classroom.

The researcher had access to all interactions and provided continual support by means of technology tools such as group texting, audio platforms, and web conferencing. Learner expectations including working collaboratively were defined as sharing experiences to “put themselves in a position to extend their knowledge” (Ferreira & Lacerda dos Santos, 2009, p. 173) as well as “collective competence” (p. 174).

Following the activity, all virtual groups met by means of VoiceThread (2017) to present their action plans, the manner in which they collaborated, and how they reached a consensus on multiple solutions. Case study literature indicates multiple solutions, solution paths, or no solution at all (Kitchner, 1983), and in this case, findings revealed that the groups were not only able to derive multiple solutions which aimed at building and sustaining inclusiveness but also experienced transformative learning based on the *Authentic Action-oriented Framing for Environmental Shifts* (AAFES) method (Watt, 2015). According to Robinson-Wood and Watt (2015) transformational learning was about “inclusion of difference rather than focusing on ways the marginalized members of a community can survive dehumanization” (p. 240).

Following the group presentations, learners also developed reflection papers giving an account of the processes by means of a) a summary of their learnings; b) an analysis of their perspectives of the event; and c) their plan of applying their learnings (Bullock & Hwak, 2001). At the end of the activity, each group was also interviewed by the researcher using one pre-set question aimed to explore the insights of problem- solving and decision making as collaborative teams. The question was an open-ended question to get as much data as possible: What were your experiences solving a real-life problem in your groups?

Although this was a preliminary study, using triangulated data collection methods resulted in increasing the reliability of the study (Creswell, 2012). The three sources of textual data were transcribed and analyzed by means of a software, HyperRESEARCH (2017) which “enables you to code and retrieve, build theories, and conduct analyses of your data” (para.1). Initial exploration showed that all three types of data yielded emerging themes related to solving an authentic problem, collaborative learning, and leading culturally diverse inclusiveness.

FINDINGS

Designing courses which include activities regarding developing strategies for such meaningful real-life problems, and making data driven decisions collaboratively has a vast impact on university educational leadership professional programs. Findings related to the collaborative learning process confirmed key findings as stated by Alawi (1994) “enhances student learning and evaluation of classroom experiences” (p. 159). Analyzing the experiences of the learners indicated that learning to dissect real-life contexts can be extremely useful in preparing educators who would be building and sustaining collaborative settings to effectively lead culturally diverse inclusiveness.

Using strategies for problem solving through a case study demonstrated that learners were able to make sense of the challenges taking *technological, demographic, economic, peace, self-awareness, and ethical imperatives* (Martin & Nakayama, 2007, p. 3) into account. All three sources of data found that almost all learners gained more “confidence” as they worked collaboratively to make sense of real conflict narratives. During the group interviews, all four groups reported that they were able to “initiate discussions,” “build relations,” and “make decisions” as they demonstrated their leadership skills. Most importantly the potential leaders felt “prepared” for their “internships and clinical field experiences” since they analyzed “problems related to real life.” The data also included frequent use of themes such as “aware of definitions and concepts,” “understand cultural responsiveness,” understand “collaboration,” “feel confident in using skills.” These statements also backed up the fundamental three dimensions of educational leadership program standards (NPBEA, 2011).

The findings also revealed that both knowledge sharing and collaborative behaviors were evident as a result of learners’ *identity confirmation* (Verkuyten, 2010). The course was designed in that at the beginning, learners introduced themselves. Activities leading to the case study offered other varied opportunities for learners to become even more acquainted by learners sharing their background information, institution information, gender, age, race, national origin, profession, experience, and diversity problems they would encounter in their work throughout the course. Being somewhat familiar with each other was a key factor in collaboration, leaving no space for subgroup formation (Gratton & Erikson, 2007) resulting in learners to freely and openly discuss their perspectives.

Observations

Observations by lead observers demonstrated that tackling real-world problems in small groups settings helped learners to effectively apply their theoretical knowledge to practice and to reach a consensus. While addressing such issues as equity, social injustice, hatred, violence, and discrimination, the groups used their analytical, synthesis, and reflection skills, and identified practical solutions to overcome the challenges. Since the five observers were instructed by the researcher to observe the group dynamics, and report the communication skills the members used, their texts included the types of questions asked and nature of interactions which took place. Feelings (negative or positive), and attitudes (reactive versus proactive) were all noted.

Furthermore, the four observers reported the conflict resolution styles (Levi, 2001) used by the group members. Based on lead observer notes, during the initial phase of the discussions, of the 13 learners only one member used *avoidance* described as “ignore the issue or deny that there is a problem” (Levi, 2001, p. 121). Three learners used *accommodation* described as “give up their positions as to be agreeable” (Levi, 2001, p. 121). Two learners used *compromise* described as “balance the goals of each participants” (Levi, 2001, p. 122). At the initial stages of the group gatherings, only one learner used *confrontation* described as “acting aggressively and trying to win one-way” (Levi, 2001, p. 122). The lead observers noted that after the initial stage, all students starting using *collaboration* described as “searched for solutions that satisfy everyone” (Levi, 2001, p. 122).

Group Interview

Later, when groups were interviewed, members stated that the course activities building up to the case study prepared them for “both cooperativeness and respect for each other’s position” (Levi, 2001, p. 122) and that they felt ready to confront challenges and lead cultural inclusiveness. Groups also stated that course activities leading to the case study, armed them with tools to build a collaborative climate which served as an essential step in leading the members to be open and supportive of each other.

In group reporting almost all learners repeatedly indicated that they preferred working in “collaborative teams” rather than individually as they experienced more “confidence” based on group support, and reported that they felt “like leaders” setting aside their “self-interests,” and felt like they could “manage differences,” manage cultural barriers,” and “inclusiveness.” Group feedback also reported issues of “trust building” and “self-confidence” when confronted with such “challenging issues,” and indicated that it was extremely “useful” in collaborating when making such decisions, at least during initial phases of tackling real-life problems. Learners also noted that, because the future was unforeseeable, it would be “more realistic to focus institutional goals and inclusiveness.”

All group interviews indicated that working together in a collaborative learning environment helped make sense of the issues related to student success and diversity inclusiveness. By bringing their “minds together” to create “collective decision making,” learners felt they were able to develop a “more effective path.” Anecdotal data indicated that such collaboration raised their “self-confidence in decision making.” It was also noteworthy that almost all comments pointed to bringing more awareness and understanding of the cultural dimension of the problem resulting in valuing cross cultural communication (Howard-Hamilton et al., 1998; Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989). Additionally, majority of the learners in their focus groups reported that they felt “more prepared” and “more confident in being able to make decisions collectively” in their educational settings.

Learner Reflections

Learner reflections revealed that complex problem-solving encouraged group members to move through “negative feelings” like differences, power, and avoidance to cooperate, and eventually, reach a consensus. Moreover, reflection data revealed that group members were able to “make more sense” of the “facts,” helping each other to decipher cultural lines and the gaps of the case. Learners also noted “support” and “openness” when exposed to different lenses as they analyzed problems by varied activities including discussions and reflections leading to the case study. Majority of the learners also indicated that achieving such results would have been “far more difficult,” had they worked individually. Seven learners used the adjective “difficult” in tackling issues related to cultural diversity as they did not feel experienced working in diverse settings. To work collaboratively ‘helped immensely” as “cultural diversity” was a “complicated term.” Almost all members revealed that they “felt more secure” in collective decision making and less “worried about failure.” Another noteworthy finding was that reflections allowed students to “back track” their actions and the processes which led the learners to become “more aware of their responses, and actions.” Almost all learners stated that the reflection activity was a way to become “more mindful regarding group interactions.”

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Solving an authentic case study in a collaborative setting could be extremely rewarding for potential educational leaders. These findings have several implications. First, it is fundamental to include real-life problem solving activities in designing educational leadership programs; however these problems need to be aligned with current political, social, economical, and legal challenges. Including such challenges can be extremely beneficial in keeping potential leaders abreast of worldly affairs and cultural settings of their schools since educational institutions cannot be thought of standing alone bodies.

Moreover, educational leadership preparation programs need to encourage more collaborative thinking, collaborative behavior, and collective efficacy to better prepare educational leaders to focus on their institution's educational goals with the intention of effectively leading cultural inclusiveness. Collaborative learning dictates that individual goals and agendas be set aside which would benefit all stakeholders, encouraging the elimination of cultural obstacles for student success (Olivares, 2007). Since the importance of working collaboratively was evident throughout the professional standards, this study found that learning how to collaborate is a fundamental skill to acquire. In fact, it is noteworthy that, of the total 107 questions on the Educational Testing Services (ETS), School Leaders Licensure Assessment (SLS), 21 questions (15%) related to "collaboration with stakeholder" (ETS, 2016, p. 5) make up the SLS as indicated in an SLS study companion (ETS, 2016).

This study was limited in that it explored the experiences of one particular group of learners of an educational leadership program, and analyzed the qualitative data retrieved from the groups as it related to problem-solving and collaboration. The group was a specialized group and already had some knowledge and experience in working as teams in solving conflict narratives. Based on the nature of the program, and the fact that the learners knew each other to a degree, motivated the groups to work cohesively and create a sense of belonging. In addition, the groups were trained through previous activities resulting in more awareness in culturally sensitive topics.

The aforementioned limitations led to recommendations for further research. While qualitative data gained insights into group interactions, and collaborative problem-solving, further research is recommended with larger populations, and varied populations to determine the efficacy of group dynamics in working collaboratively, and in collective decision making. It is also recommended that a quantitative study be conducted to look into the behaviors of educational leader teams by means of using the *Collaborative Team Member Rating Sheet* created by Lafasto and Larson (2001 p. 29).

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