Research Article Summary: “Got Theory: Reconceptualizing the Nature of the Theory-Practice Gap in K-12 Educational Leadership”

There are interesting ways in which the leaders in the districts we work with think about the underlying theories and research of the Blueprint, and how that relates to practice. There is a belief in education that educators or leaders need to have a full understanding of the underlying theory before diving into the practice of whatever system they are installing, or whatever new instructional practice or resource they are planning to use in their classrooms. But, a new article in the Journal of Educational Administration (and an older article I have included too) suggests that this approach to the “gap between practice and theory” might actually be wrong, and that engaging in practice might be a requirement of better understanding the theory behind it. It is the education research version of “Which came first: the chicken or the egg?”

“Got Theory: Reconceptualizing the Nature of the Theory-Practice Gap in K-12 Educational Leadership” from the latest issue of the Journal of Educational Administration by Rachel Roegman and Sarah Woulfin explores how educational leaders engage with theory and practice in three different contexts. Normally, the gap between understanding an underlying theory and putting that theory into practice is viewed as a problem, in that it posits that leaders have a hard time taking a theory or concept (like the Blueprint) and putting that into practice in their schools. And, in our own interviews with facilitators, we heard numerous examples of how some districts struggle to move forward because their leaders are still trying to make sense of the concepts, and are apprehensive to move forward until they understand the entirety of the concept. However, this article suggests that leaders can benefit from such a gap in that it forces them to think about the context of their schools and district. Decoupling the theory from their day-to-day context is sometimes a necessary part of developing true understanding of the theory. In the end, leaders develop a better understanding about how their adaptation to the local context can make the work stronger, which, in turn, helps them develop a deeper understanding of the theory. Through a series of vignettes in this article, the authors suggest that the leaders who bounce between practice and theory in a learning cycle can not only develop a greater understanding of the theory, but can come up with unique solutions for how such theory will be put into practice in their districts. Such approaches often lead to quicker installation and greater fidelity.

This is not a really new concept. For teachers, the notion of “educative curricula” have been in practice for nearly two decades (see the article by Davis and Krajcik, linked below), with the thought being that curricula that embed loosely scripted lessons that model new (high-quality) instructional practices can help teachers to better understand the underlying theoretical underpinnings of the instructional practice by providing cues for reflection and examination of student work. Again, the notion is that teachers may not fully understand the high-quality practices until they are encouraged to try them out on their own (with some significant scaffolding provided through curriculum materials, coaching, or other supports). It is really one of those “chicken or egg” dilemmas, where the most effective approach is not to start with one or the
other, but a little mix of each. And, considering we have the supports within the Blueprint resources, such as the Evidence of Practice documents, Planning tools, and Assessment suite for each component, this article suggests that our approach to developing understanding of systems and how best to install comes from trying first, reflecting (on practice as it connects to theory), and trying again until we get it right.

Or, to quote John Dewey, “We do not learn from experience... we learn from reflecting on experience.”

Citations:
