Chapter 1

Conceptualizing LEAD: Service Learning Leadership Experience for Student Success

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ABSTRACT

At a critical point in education, teachers are the agents that can positively affect the outcomes of all learners. Preparing teachers to understand youth and the challenges they face through globalization, economic uncertainties, and social inequities must begin in Teacher Education programs. L.E.A.D. (Leadership Experience for Academic Directions) is a service-learning program designed from a need to reach marginalized and vulnerable youth, to aid in closing the achievement gap, and advocating for social justice and inclusion. This chapter highlights the conceptualization of L.E.A.D. based on research, theory, and practice.

INTRODUCTION

Education has reached a critical point in its importance in preparing today’s youth for changing labour markets caused by increased globalization and uncertainties (Lechner, Tomasik, Sibereisen, 2016). According to Lechner et al. (2016), these potential occupational uncertainties “threaten the mastery of career-related developmental tasks” (p. 91). With this dilemma at hand, educational institutions must consider building teacher candidates’ and teachers’ understanding of how to facilitate youth’s agency, especially their agency, in pursuing a life plan. Further, current educators are encouraged to foster the necessary relationships and support to prepare our youth for this potentially unpredictable future.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-2430-5.ch001
First, we need to look at education through a growth mindset (Dweck, 2008) as well as through positive psychology (Boniwell, 2012; Buchanan & Kern, 2017). School systems should identify interventions and pedagogy that allow youth to build a personal sense of wellbeing and understand what constitutes the optimal functioning of individuals, groups, and society. Fundamental to this is knowing the traits that empower people to operate at their fullest potential by discovering their strengths; having them participate in healthy experiences and relationships; providing opportunities for them to engage and be interested in life tasks; and by having them develop a sense of meaning and purpose in life (Buchanan & Kern, 2017). Buchanan and Kern (2017) summarize this approach as “fundamentally enriching our appreciation of what it means to reach our potential beyond learning and achievement, and in helping populations widen their circle of compassion to encompass our collective ability to flourish” in society (p. 3).

Through a positive psychology lens (Boniwell, 2012; Buchanan & Kern, 2017), we need to be asking what we can do better with what we have? Teacher education must be at the root of this approach to improving pedagogy and holistically preparing our youth. One of the best negotiators of academic outcomes is the degree to which students are motivated by and engaged in their interactions with teachers (Allen, Pianta, Gregory, Mikami, & Lun, 2011). I believe this is at the core of how we should engage with education in preparing our teachers to have the efficacy and skills necessary to meet the needs of our youth best and prepare them to thrive in society.

An increase in school standards and competency measures is detracting from this movement. Expectations are rising while adolescents face increasing personal and social challenges. Even more critical are the challenges educators face such as an increase in diversity, a decrease in support personnel and outside resources, and a decrease in professional development. Add to that government cuts to education, and we could call this a crisis. Therefore, in our efforts to produce academically successful students, positive psychology, as well as issues of emotional and social connections within the schools and the broader community, are often overlooked.

Subsequently, doing more with less means that we need to increase human capital (Fitzsimons, 2017) and reciprocity of experience with limited resources to help connect these students with their communities both academically and socially. Increased human capital is a hidden resource that is afforded schools through the field experience of teacher candidates in teacher education programs. According to Fitzsimons (2017):

The human capital theory emphasizes how education increases productivity and efficiency by increasing the level of cognitive stock of economically productive social capability, which is a product of abilities and investment in human beings (p. 479).

Teacher candidates spend up to 40% of their time in schools interning with a classroom teacher and involved in extracurricular or service-learning. This increased capital in the schools provides additional one-on-one, or small group differentiated learning as well as empathic and relational support for at-risk youth. Thus L.E.A.D. was conceptualized as a L.E.A.D.ership program for teacher candidates to mentor youth in developing skills of resilience, L.E.A.D.ership, and efficacy to achieve their fullest potential.

With L.E.A.D., I knew that we needed teacher candidates to build relationships with all learners, especially given the complex challenges facing our youth. For years, the stereotype has been that elementary teachers care about kids while secondary teachers care about their subject matter. Good teaching is universal, and it starts with building trusting relationships with students and becoming co-learners