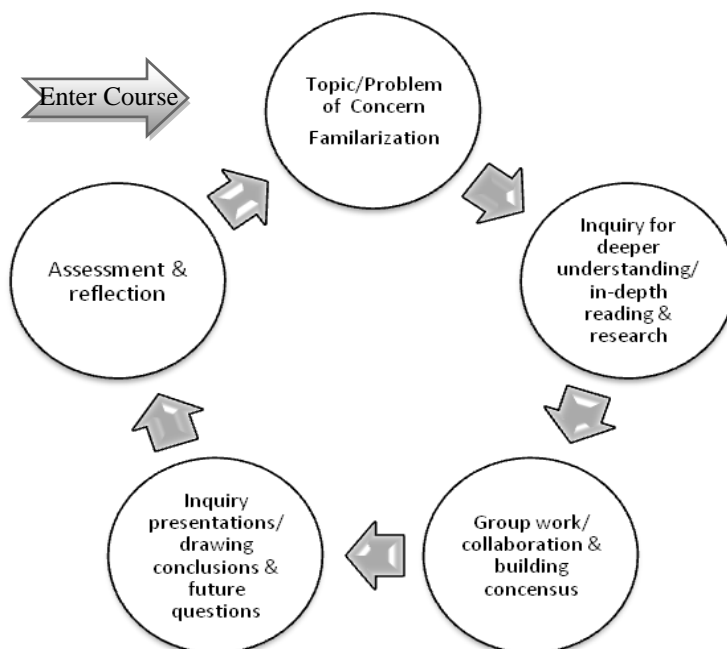


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Digital Portfolio Reflection/Synthesis

### Program Synthesis and Reflection

The Educational Leadership and Accountability Doctoral Program at St. John's University presented to each of us opportunities to sharpen our skills and build our professional toolboxes. We have been given a sound foundation that will serve us well as we move from the cohort work cycle to completing dedicated research to working for positive change in our school districts Michael Fullan (2003) tells us "leaders are change agents: the key is to build up leaders' conceptions of what it means to be a leader. That must involve developing skills as reflective practitioners." In this program, we developed such skills through a learning-practice-reflection sequence. This cycle of critical work allowed us to practice on real situations existing in Long Island school districts while we were building a knowledge base from the works of our professors, successful leaders, authors, theorists, and researchers. The scope of this program is represented by the steps on this conceptual chart delineating the inquiry cycle of our coursework:



This critical work of our courses followed five strands of knowledge bases: management science, leadership, policy & politics, research methodology, and organizational theory. These areas coordinate with the suggested leadership skills and talents as outlined in Marzano's (2003) leadership matrix and Reeves' (2004) leadership imperatives.

I have been able to draw on the accumulated theories and practices as we wove these five strands into a tightly-knotted rope of knowledge while we progressed through the program. Each one of us in the cohort will take away something different from this program, tempered by our personal concerns, interpretations, and paradigm shifts. This "moral wisdom," Henderson and Gornik (2007) tell us, "is not a thing, but a process; not singular, but plural; not static, but dynamic; not a technique but an inquiring way of living". Their description is applicable to our work as school leaders and in our cyclic course work, including management science.

### *Management Science*

The four Management Science courses taught me the skills of managing data, mining data, and the technological expertise to complete research and analyses of data. As Edgar Schein (1992) tells us, such skills are essential for leaders: effective organizations import, analyze, and act upon information efficiently. There was an immediate application for much of the information and techniques shared with us, particularly Dr. Jonathan Hughes' (2004) database of financial, instructional, achievement, and demographic data for decisions and planning. I was able to apply many of the skills I learned in Computer Programs & Applications taught by Dr. Hughes to my own district's needs and performance against other districts and often used the SCOPE Almanac in my work. We are reminded by Leedy and Ormrod (2001) that "data are of little or no value merely as data". They go on to explain that data present a problem that

becomes the purpose of research. Identifying data for studies and the ways we approached those studies composed the core of our program's research methodology.

### *Research Methodology*

The research methodology courses introduced us to aspects of both quantitative and qualitative research techniques. Our professors have great expectations for our future use of these skills, and for good reason. Educational research authors Charles and Mertler (2002) declare: "It is now considered that practical research undertaken by educators is more likely to lead to classroom change than is formal research conducted by research specialists".

Quantitative methodology offers a clean examination of the hypothesis and its related variables and data. I find myself drawn to the messiness and interaction required in qualitative methods. Leedy and Ormrod (2001) refer to the qualitative method as chaotic, while Bogdan and Biklen (2003) describe qualitative methodology with key concepts like "meaning, everyday life, and common-sense understanding". It is important that as researchers we remember that the methodologies are more akin to falling on a continuum rather than an exclusive dichotomy (Gall, Gall, & Borg, (2003).

I appreciate the insights and direction provided by Dr. Hughes, Dr. Mitchell, and Dr. Taylor-Dunlop so that I have an intimate understanding of my choices in research as I move toward my applied research dissertation.

### *Leadership*

The demands of educational leadership require a plethora of skills and information that encompass not only what we need to know but "what we don't know we don't know" (Dr. Hughes, 2004). Dr. McGuire's insight into leadership and his guidance of our explorations of leadership issues helped me better define my leadership beliefs and philosophy.

The New York State Blue Ribbon Panel on School Leadership's nine *Essential Knowledge and Skills for Effective School Leadership* points (2005) were critical to my personal reflections of my effectiveness as a school leader. Therein lay the key: effectiveness. While anyone with the right credentials can be a school leader, how and what we do in that position determines our value as a leader. As we were exposed to the works of various theorists, I most related to moral leadership advocated by Sergiovanni (2001). He explained that leadership has a variety of requisites, "but competence and virtue should dominate". I subscribe to that belief because all the skills one can gain are futile if they are applied for the wrong reasons (Fullan, 2003).

Our cohort focused on the long view as we surveyed leadership under the guidance of Dr. Smith. Our examination of national issues and then researching a selected topic in our own back yards clarified how all schools and all educational leaders' issues are related, regardless of their geographic location (Sergiovanni, 1999). It became readily apparent that the competencies we were developing in our cohort projects were similar to those situations we would be required to tackle as school leaders. Bolman and Deal (2008) and Elmore (2003) remind us that even though such skills are transferrable, the answers we seek are contextual. This program was instrumental in illuminating that point.

### *Policy and Politics*

Educational leaders may possess skills and knowledge, but they must be prepared to deal with the complications of politics that are inherent in education, especially when implementing change or policy. Policy change, as described by Fullan (2001), and as we learned in Dr. McGuire's and Dr. Smith's courses, comes with many difficulties. Deborah Stone (2001) reminds us constituents are committed to their beliefs and perspectives, and change can threaten

their security. Additionally, school supporters commonly battle between personal interests and communal interests. Leaders' understanding of this conflict, as Clarence Stone (1996) posits, gives us insight into working collaboratively with all stakeholders.

Dealing with change and policy can be a difficult task for leaders even when driven toward goals that are in the best interest of the students (Fullan, 2001). School boards, parents, teachers, staff, and the community must be brought on board in part by the communication and listening skills, and open-mindedness of the school leader. In dealing with the local community of my school regarding change, I was quick to learn (and remember from these courses) that their perspectives come from a different place than mine. It then becomes my responsibility, as we are instructed by Comer (2004), to share and educate so together we can make the most informed decision possible for the sake of the students.

### *Organizational Theory*

The efficacy of the organization falls under the purview of the school leader. As we learned in the three classes in organizational theory, how the organization is structured and how efficiently it operates directly affects the students and their learning (Bolman and Deal, 2008; Schein, 1992; Popkewitz, Tabachnick, and Wehlage, 1982). Dr. Smith's Advocacy Design Center Model (1990) shows that when we evaluate the components of a school, including instruction, governance, organization, and accountability, we get a picture of the whole school. His model invites "public discourse and constructs a viable consensus among school stakeholders as they work together for a stronger school". Just as the strands of this program do not stand alone and are interrelated, the organization's structure and work therein are affected by and have an effect on all the facets of the school (Resnick, 2007). Emphasized in each class and

advocated by Peter Senge (2000), a leader cannot tackle issues in one of these areas without affecting the performance of the others.

Edgar Schein (1992) warns us that when evaluating an organization's activities and accomplishments, it is imperative to achieve consensus on the criteria and the measuring tool so that everyone is on the same page. Without this front work on the part of the leader, conflict can result and undermine the entire process. As I propose to use the Advocacy Design Center Model in a selected school, I must be cognizant of these points at every step of the process, but especially understand the importance of building capacity in the initial steps (Senge, 2000; Newmann and Wehlage, 1997; Smith, 1990). Creating these conditions for change, Douglas Reeves (2009) explains, means crafting a paradox where "the elevation of the vision is far greater than the individual and, at the same time, elevate the individual to a place that is unique, powerful, and essential".

### *Final Thoughts*

Paramount to the work of educational leaders is a sound foundation of the skills, understandings, and collaboration required for working in and out of the school. A school, like the work of its leader, needs to call on the talents of everyone affiliated with it (Sergiovanni, 2003). Working in groups and guided by our knowledgeable professors, each course exemplified the scaffolding and sociocultural learning styles that Vygotsky (1978) and Bronfenbrenner (2005) both advocated. Just as we worked in the cohort model to achieve our goals in each course, leaders must draw on that type of collaboration to ensure success for their school, and ultimately, the students.

As a bricoleur, I have the responsibility to ever explore new avenues of research and information to make sense of all the complexities in education. This program has provided

extensive variety to my bricolage including: management techniques, research methodologies, knowledge of organizations, capacity in policies and politics, and an understanding of the demands of leadership. Now, as I move forward I know my bricolage will be a life-long effort as I continue to build my educational leadership repertoire.