

Commentary – Why aren't more educational leadership scholars researching technology?

As I write this commentary, we still are in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Tens of millions of students worldwide have been displaced from their traditional educational settings. Families, educators and national economies are desperate for children to return to schools. The educational disruptions that many thought might be a matter of months have stretched to over a year. And we are still unsure what the future months will bring.

If there is anything that we have learned recently about school leadership, one of the primary lessons has to pertain to the importance of solid technology leadership. School administrators that made digital investments in years past reaped the benefits during the pandemic crisis. For example, schools that already had robust, take-home 1:1 computing programs in place have survived much better than those that have had to scramble to get learning technologies into the hands of schoolchildren. Schools that already had tackled school and home Internet access issues have had fewer concerns regarding digital equity compared to the schools that had to frantically purchase mobile Internet hot spots with limited data for families. Schools with technology-savvy teachers have been better-positioned to move instructionally beyond digital worksheets and homework packets than those that had to rapidly try and “skill up” large percentages of their educator workforce on basic technology systems and technology integration strategies. And so on. . .

That is why this special issue of the *Journal of Educational Administration* is so important. The articles here make critical contributions to our understandings of technology leadership in schools and continue to round out a fairly sparse literature base. As useful as these articles are, however, I am struck that the authors in this special issue are “the usual suspects.” With the exception of a few new additions, most of the authors in this special issue are the same handful of educational leadership researchers that have cared about school technology leadership in the past. The work of this small cadre of technology-interested educational leadership researchers is dwarfed by the needs of the P-12 schools that we allegedly serve.

We are grateful for everyone's helpful contributions, of course. But we also must question why so few educational leadership researchers are paying attention to technology-related issues in the first place. For instance, it is difficult not to wonder, “Would more schools have been better positioned to respond to the pandemic if we previously had made greater investments in school technology leadership research and practice?” While the pandemic has exposed to the general public many of the ongoing deficiencies that schools face when it comes to technology integration and implementation, none of those deficiencies are surprises. For instance, the three issues that I cited above – the need to get computers into the hands of schoolchildren in this digital era, inequities in home and school Internet access, and teachers' lack of robust technology-related skill sets and pedagogies – are all known concerns that have persisted for decades. Frankly, our lack of progress is dismaying. At some point we have to place the responsibility where it lies: on the school administrators and policymakers who are in charge of our school systems and, yes, also on the leadership and policy scholars who are supposed to be preparing and informing them. At the risk of asking a rhetorical question, could our educators, students and families have operated from a different foundation during the pandemic if we had done a better job earlier? I think they could have.



We know what we need to do

We know much of what we need to do as educational leadership scholars in the technology arena. For example, a decade ago, my co-authors and I articulated a basic framework (McLeod *et al.*, 2011) that categorized three research intersections between school leadership and digital technologies:

The first intersection of technology and school leadership is what we call *using digital technologies to teach traditional educational leadership content*. In this domain of scholarship and preparation, little attempt is made to change the substantive content of educational leadership coursework. Instead, the emphasis is placed on the delivery modality of traditional educational leadership classes and how it might be altered and improved using digital learning and communication tools. . . .

The second intersection of technology and school leadership is what we call *training school administrators to better use digital technologies*. In this domain, there is a technology emphasis on course content rather than course delivery, but the content focus is on digital productivity and communication tools. . . .

Finally, the third intersection of technology and school leadership is what we call *preparing school administrators to be better technology leaders*. Like the second domain, the technology emphasis in this domain is on course content rather than course delivery, but the content focus is on leadership capacities rather than tools. This is the domain in which educational leadership scholarship is particularly scarce, whether for preparation purposes or for ongoing leadership practice. (pp. 288–291)

That third intersection is what always has been most important but also most neglected. While we need educational leadership faculty to investigate how we use technology to deliver our own courses and to train administrators to be more skilled users of technology tools, our partners in the field desperately need more help understanding how to be better technology leaders in their local school systems. As we said ten years ago, we “need to create and facilitate learning environments for P-12 students that prepare them for the digital, global world in which we now live” (McLeod *et al.*, 2011, p. 292). Our continued failure to do so results in a host of ongoing challenges and inequities, all of which have been amplified during the global pandemic.

We don't need to be technology-fluent

That third intersection of *helping school administrators be better technology leaders* is a broad category of scholarship. That is a good thing because that breadth allows for a “big tent” approach when it comes to inviting academics into the space. Dexter *et al.* (2017) recently summarized the empirical literature on school technology leadership and described a multitude of areas in which educational leadership scholars could make a contribution. They also issued three calls for action for school leadership faculty:

- (1) To learn more about the identified key practices for leading school-based technology, keep current on research-based practices that have been empirically linked to student achievement, and incorporate these into the courses that they teach;
- (2) To learn how to learn about new technologies and about what they offer for teaching and learning; and
- (3) To consider conducting new research on technology leadership in schools and encouraging their doctoral students to do so as well (p. 223).

A key observation here is that educational leadership faculty do not have to be technology-fluent to contribute to the scholarship of school technology leadership. As a researcher, you may not be very technology-savvy, but you know federal and state policy inside and out. Great! You have a contribution to make as we look at relevant school technology policymaking. As a professor, you may struggle to stay on top of the latest technology tools, but you are a worldwide expert on adult learning in schools. Awesome! You have a contribution to make regarding the intersections of technology and educator professional development. Whether your scholarly lenses are within the fields of organizational theory, finance, the principalship or the superintendency, social justice, the law, curriculum, instruction, assessment, family-community engagement or a whole host of other educational leadership domains, there are technology-related intersections with each and every one of those. And that is where we need help. We need more scholars – and their doctoral students – researching these kinds of intersections.

As I said in another article a decade ago:

We know, simply from projecting current trends forward, that in the future our learning will be even more digital, more mobile, and more multimedia than it is now. It will be more networked and more interconnected and often will occur online, lessening dependence on local humans. It frequently will be more informal and definitely will be more self-directed, individualized, and personalized. It will be more computer based and more software mediated and thus less reliant on live humans. It will be more open and more accessible and may occur in simulation or video-game-like environments. And so on. We're not going to retrench or go backward on any of these paths. We thus need school leaders who can begin envisioning the implications of these environmental characteristics for learning, teaching, and schooling. We need administrators who can design and operationalize our learning environments to reflect these new affordances. We need leaders who are brave enough to create the new paradigm instead of simply tweaking the status quo and who have the knowledge and ability to create schools that are relevant to the needs of students, families, and society. (McLeod, 2011, p. 4)

We – the collective “we” of educational leadership scholars everywhere – cannot continue to ignore the technology needs of the administrators that we are preparing and supporting. We also cannot rely on a small handful of colleagues to generate enough research, policymaking advice and practical resources to serve the enormous and diverse needs of practitioners in the field across their myriad contexts. It has been a decade since our last call to action on this front, and we have seen during our schools' pandemic struggles how well that approach has worked out. Less obvious are the day-to-day, year-to-year harms that also accrue when we ignore technology issues as school leaders and as educational leadership researchers. Just because those harms are not as conspicuous as current pandemic-era challenges does not mean they are not very real, however, with significant negative impacts on students, families, educators and school systems.

As educational leadership researchers, so many of us say that we care about equity and social justice. We say that we care about the children and families who are left behind in today's educational and policy contexts. And yet we continue to silo our scholarly work in ways that ignore the present and future digital realities that students, teachers and school leaders operate within daily. The future of learning, teaching and schooling will be even more technological than it is now. We invite you to join us as we research the key leadership behaviors, support structures and policies that help students live and thrive in our technology-suffused present and future.

It is 2021. Isn't it time for us to get serious about technology?

Scott McLeod

References

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