

A Conversation with Fenwick English: Standards Without Standardization

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Though many professional organizations (AASA, NAESP, NASSP, etc.) have a stake in the standards movement as we know it in education administration, no two professional organizations have more to gain or lose in the movement than the organizations representing preparation programs and the individual professors within institutions preparing today's school leaders (NCPEA & UCEA). Fenwick W. English, currently a Distinguished Professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, is an outspoken critic of the standards for educational leaders developed by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) and the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) accreditation process. In the following conversation with Fenwick English, the executive directors of NCPEA and UCEA pose several important and critical questions of interest to the membership of both organizations.

Fenwick English presented a paper at the recent UCEA conference in Pittsburgh, highlighting his objection to the current review process used by the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) as part of the National Council of Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) program review.

English's paper was also disseminated to the membership of UCEA and presented to the NCPEA Executive Board for discussion. Because both the UCEA Board and NCPEA Board thought the issues raised merit further discussion and dialogue, Creighton and Young thought it appropriate and helpful to invite English to further clarify his stance. This discussion is meant to foster the dialogue, but does not represent the position of either NCPEA and UCEA. The questions to English and his responses hopefully will be of interest to the readers of NCPEA Education Leadership Review.

Ted to Fenwick:

"You have stated your concern with the ELCC process includes standards with standardization, and prefer a situation where we have standards without standardization. Can you elaborate on this issue, and perhaps point to another profession which has standards without standardization?"

Fenwick:

"The ELCC standards are centered on what are called "candidate proficiencies," which is a standardized list of attributes of school leaders derived from some very limited empirical research, a lot of craft knowledge validated by practitioners through consensus procedures employed by ETS, and concepts from TQM (total quality management). The standards are undeniably centered on efficiency. The only way they "fit" is to limit the variance found within schools, otherwise no standardized list would be adequate. Gary Anderson's analysis (2001) shows how responses on the SLAA have been "dumbed down" and that a candidate who sees too many nuances ends up being "at risk." Joe Schneider and Honor Fede, the administrators of the ELCC (Educational Leadership Licensure Council) gave a Power Point presentation in March 2002 to the NPBEA clearly showing how the ELCC standards via NCATE treat program variance, driving out foundational courses such as history and philosophy. Standardized leaders can be produced with a standardized curriculum. This is what I mean by efficiency centered. Another word for "standardization" is uniformity. That is where the ELCC standards take us. To have standards without standardization one thinks of law and medicine. One wants competent lawyers and doctors without

reducing the complexity of the challenges facing those professions. The nature of the knowledge bases of those applied fields has a much longer history than educational administration and they have established a tradition of change within their knowledge bases that is different from ours. Much of the "progress" in medicine, for example, has occurred "out of the knowledge base" of the time. In law there is always the possibility of a *Brown v. Board of Education* type decision which overturns everything that came before it and leads to a whole new data base of case law. There is no such recognition of the ELCC or NCATE about this with educational leadership."

Michelle to Fenwick:

"As we are certain you are aware, the purposes of accreditation review include measurements of program quality as well as mechanisms for program improvement. Your statement indicates that you do not see the ELCC review of educational leadership preparation programs for NCATE as realizing either of those purposes. If this is so, could you describe with more detail the impact you see this process having on educational leadership programs?"

Fenwick:

"I don't think that the ELCC standards have much to do with "quality." Rather, they are measures of conformance to a standardized list of attributes produced by a political process with a political agenda. I participated in the early drafts of the NPBEA documents when I worked at NASSP (National Association of Secondary School Principals) with their curriculum advisory committee. All of the content proposed at that point in the area of curriculum, which included key ideas from critical theory, were ultimately erased from the documents finally produced by CCSSO (Council for Chief State School Officers) later. It was at that juncture that the effort was thoroughly rinsed in the TQM (total quality management) ideology popular at the time. The "standards" today are efficiency (cost) centered. One of the tragedies is that the TQM ideology is seen as "scientific" and "neutral" instead of being what it is—centered on cost reduction where quality is defined as "cheaper." The proponents are suffering from historical amnesia. They are living in some sort of "value free" world which doesn't exist anywhere. They want better schools instead of different schools. The schools are failing about one-third of the students they now serve. To make them better at that is an oxymoron.

The ELCC standards embrace no new approaches and no new theoretical foci. The conceptual framework the standards embody is Frederick Taylor's "job de-skilling" in new guises. The standards debase theory because they don't offer any new theory. As they are applied to programs of educational leadership, the application process drives out diversity because efficiency is its own end. The impact on universities who are preparing educational leaders will be to produce candidates who are proficient in some aspects of administrative skills, but who are theoretically blind and incapable of critical reflection outside the radius of efficiency. The homogenization of educational leadership programs will lead ultimately to its privatization off the university campus and its complete debasement as a profession."

Ted to Fenwick:

"We all agree that departments of educational leadership are collections of individuals and standards "decreed from on high" rarely have a significant impact on teaching and learning unless the major focus is centered on the individual professor within the organizational unit. Assuming you are correct in asserting that the implementation of standards can drive out diversity and creativity and will lead to the homogenization of educational leadership programs, I pose the same questions to you that Jennifer O'Day asked in her recent article on Accountability and School Reform (Harvard Education Review, Fall 2002): (1) How will the standards movement reach beyond the collective level of colleges and departments to mobilize such changes among individuals and (2) What conditions need to be in place for this connection to occur?"

Fenwick:

"What's different about this "standards" approach is that it is tied to the policing function via NCATE. And NCATE brings with it an "inspection" that is quite different than practiced in the past. The inspection involves having to demonstrate via a "matrix" placed in a linear chart, how each 'standard' or 'indicator' is indexed to the existing course structure. That is "up front and personal" and each professor must respond. The linkage must be traceable via course syllabi, assignments, and evaluation tools such as grading rubrics. This level of connectivity is "tight" by comparison to former methods. In this case, the nature of the standards becomes critical. If the standards embrace certain values they can drive out other

values. I think the standards are fundamentally flawed and they don't even recognize any research or scholarship that is not "standard centered."

Michelle to Fenwick:

"Many faculty consider the ELCC standards to be an adequate set of "minimum standards" for school leaders. Viewing standards this way would suggest that program faculty would ensure their programs enable leaders to meet these standards as well as master other knowledge, skills, etc deemed important by the faculty. Do you agree with this perspective?"

Fenwick:

"It's only minimal if you agree with the model and assumptions on which the standards are based. I've argued that this model reproduces the status quo. It offers nothing new because the advocates eliminated any new possibilities with their theoretical assumptions which are at least 30 years old or older. This model won't eliminate the achievement gap. It's insensitive culturally. It's authoritarian and works against true democratic participation in schools. The only change it permits are those alterations which reinforce the content and biases within its borders. This is not a neutral model, nor is it scientific. Much of what it endorses is craft knowledge without any empirical support. It's not that it is wrong, it's just inadequate, not even minimal."

Michelle to Fenwick:

Your responses to our previous queries communicate a large degree of skepticism regarding the current review of educational leadership programs by the ELCC. Assuming you consider the accreditation review of educational leadership programs an important tool for program improvement, do you have suggestions for the ELCC, NCATE or any other organization that provides program reviews that you believe would be more likely to lead to a quality and helpful review?

Fenwick:

Accreditation review could lead to program improvements if the criteria were different than the ones embraced by ELCC. To do that we will have to re-open a theoretical discussion which was closed off very early by Joe Murphy and others at the national level. Joe's bi-

ases are deeply embedded in the standards. He basically trashed critical theory, gender studies, cultural studies and postmodernism in his 1999 AERA invited address as "academic trophy hunting." What does that leave us with? The status quo or what Joe has called "school improvement models." We are back to where we started. To have accreditation do something other than assess, reward and punish compliance to a singular set of "universal" standards, they would have to be theoretically open to multiple perspectives. They would have to embrace the idea that there are multiple sources of truth and therefore multiple ways to do things rather than a singular way to think about schooling. We would have to put "context" back into our ideas of leadership instead of de-contextualizing it. A true "quality" review would be an examination of multiple ways of truth seeking and multiple combinations and responses not defined by a singular efficiency centered model. Such an approach would encourage theoretical, conceptual, and ultimately operational diversity where now we are hell bent for a singular vision of quality that serves as a Procrustean Bed and punishes diversity. It is happening to us now. It represents an agenda of de-skilling and de-professionalization.

Ted to Fenwick:

"You are an active member of both NCPEA and UCEA. Our final question relates to the role these two higher education organizations should play in the standards dialogue? What would you really like to say to our organizations and can you suggest ways NCPEA and UCEA can influence and impact authentic change and reform of leadership preparation programs?"

Fenwick:

Right now, neither UCEA nor NCPEA are represented on the ELCC, the sub-unit that the NPBEA has vested with the actual review of higher education programs. Professors are not represented on the ELCC because there is an organizational fee to engage in the reviews (\$25,000?). This amounts to "evaluation for hire" and is a dangerous precedent. It introduces significant bias into the review process where those programs being evaluated have no peers involved. Think about it. The rejection rate by ELCC so far is about 50%. This is way out of kilter. Are half the programs in the country low quality? I think not. The role our two higher education associations play should be to ensure that the ELCC is run

impartially and neutrally because it is engaging in the regulatory function. The current Executive Director of ELCC, Joe Schneider of AASA, has been very negative about those programs ELCC evaluates. NPBEA cannot afford the kind of biased statements he has made against higher education to continue without raising fundamental issues regarding the impartiality of the regulatory function being seriously compromised. I think of the phrase, "Let's bring the guilty parties in and give them a fair trial" captures it completely. We must have absolute confidence that the regulatory process is untainted by personal biases or conflicts of interest being present. This is not now the case. Both our associations must publicly pro-

test these conditions until they are changed. And we must press hard to change the actual standards themselves.

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Note: Fenwick English's complete article on the ELCC and NCATE accreditation process may be found on the NCPEA web page at: www.ncpea.net (link is on the front page, bottom left).

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