Got theory?: Reconceptualizing the nature of the theory-practice gap in K-12 educational leadership

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to reconceptualize the theory-practice gap in educational leadership, not as a deficit, but as a necessity for legitimacy within institutional contexts.
Design/methodology/approach – This paper draws on institutional theory to reframe the theory-practice gap, which is often seen as a deficit of leaders or preparation programs.
Findings – Three vignettes illustrate how aspiring and current educational leaders engage with theory and practice within specific contexts and in relation to specific aspects of leadership. Importantly, the vignettes show that when school leaders decouple theory from practice, they may be doing so to function as legitimate providers of K-12 educational leadership.
Research limitations/implications – The theory-practice gap, while often perceived as something negative, can have certain benefits within particular contexts. Scholars interested in the interconnections of theory and practice would benefit from considering why and how school leaders engage theory and practice.
Practical implications – Implications for leadership preparation programs highlight developing more complex views of the challenges that leaders face in tightly coupling theory and practice. To support future and current leaders, leadership preparation programs need to ensure that their students understand their institutional contexts and the reasons that leaders may decouple theory from action in various ways.
Originality/value – Instead of viewing the theory/practice gap as a deficit, this paper argues for a new way to consider why school leaders and leadership candidates may engage with theory and practice in different ways.

Keywords Leadership development, Organizational theory, Educational administration, Theory, Institutional analysis

Paper type Conceptual paper

John Dewey (1963) described experience as consisting of two aspects – the immediate moment and its influence on future experience. When experience occurs in isolation of reflection around the larger context of the experience, then "it is wholly in the air" (p. 28). Similarly, when educators engage in the practice of schooling without placing it within a greater understanding of school and how a moment of practice fits within a theory of teaching, learning or leadership, these practices also remain "wholly in the air." As a consequence, educators would be more likely to reproduce school as it is.

Building off of Dewey, English (2003) argued "there can be no claim to support a knowledge base for a profession" (p. 3) without a theory that defines and supports the profession's practice. That is, K-12 educational leadership, like any profession, requires a theoretical base to support the work of school leaders. In this conceptual paper, we return to these questions of the relationship between theory and practice in educational leadership to explore ways to better support aspiring and current school leaders in integrating theory and practice.

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In so doing, we reconceptualize the so-called theory-practice gap not as a weakness in practitioner knowledge, but as an intentional way for practitioners to navigate complex institutional contexts.

The normative literature on educational leadership maintains that practitioners should be reflexive educators who engage in praxis – "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 1970, p. 36). At the same time, leadership candidates in preparation programs are asked to apply theoretical frameworks, ranging from critical race theory and sensemaking theory to organizational theory, to their observations and activities in schools. Leadership faculty hope that these learning opportunities will enable candidates to develop complex views of the relationship between theory and practice (Kincheloe, 2004; Woulfin, 2016). By attending to both theory and practice, leaders would be able to test theory against practice (Mullen *et al.*, 2005), use the relationship between the two to deconstruct dominant ideologies (Jenlink, 2002), and make assumptions explicit in multiple contexts (Horn, 2002). Despite the interconnected nature of theory and practice, for many aspiring and current K-12 educational leaders, a gap exists between these two concepts, and this gap is treated as a problem (Bailey and Gautam, 2015; Mullen *et al.*, 2005; Saugstad, 2002).

This paper examines this purported gap and aims to reframe leaders' understanding of the relationship between theory and practice as nuanced, situated within the unique institutional environment of K-12 schooling. We argue that the disconnect is not about aspiring and current leaders' inability to apply theory to practice or understand practice through theory; nor is it about universities being disconnected from the field. Rather, we propose that aspiring and current K-12 educational leaders engage in theory and practice in various ways so they can participate as effective and legitimate educators in their buildings and districts.

We begin this paper by reviewing the literature on theory and practice in K-12 leadership and then turn to institutional theory to explore alternatives to thinking about the relationship between theory and practice as a gap. Next, we draw on our experiences as faculty in K-12 leadership preparation and as researchers with K-12 building- and district-level leaders in diverse contexts across the USA to provide illustrations of three ways that candidates and practitioners engage with theory and practice. Finally, we reflect on the barriers in pre-service leadership preparation and in-service professional development to develop and support leaders with the capacity to lead K-12 systems grounded in complex understandings of theory and practice.

The disconnect between theory and practice in K-12 leadership

Before we review the relationship between theory and practice, we present our working understanding of these two concepts. We view theory and practice as interconnected concepts whose definitions rely on each other; however, we first discuss them independently to present our usage of the terms and their usage in both literature and enactment of K-12 school leadership. We then describe and illustrate various understandings of the relationship between theory and practice in educational leadership, specifically related to the so-called gap between the two.

According to Heck and Hallinger (2005), theory in educational leadership refers to "the application of scientific principles based on empiricism rather than ideological belief, personal experience, and prescription" (p. 230). Thus, theory is a way to organize the leadership knowledge base upon which school leaders can draw. Theory includes "intellectual underpinnings" and the "methods of inquiry" (p. 230), continued Heck and Hallinger (2005), that inform the work of educational leaders and researchers. Their review of theory in the history of research on educational leadership highlights the dominance of rational, structural research paradigms up until the 1990s. That decade introduced a range of alternate theories to help understand and explain educational leadership, including

critical race theory and feminist theories. As a result, there is no "grand theory of administration" (Heck and Hallinger, 2005, p. 233), but, instead, there are competing, at times complementary and at times contradictory, theories that ask different types of questions and pursue them in different ways (Eacott, 2017; Quantz *et al.*, 2017). This multiplicity of theories is commonplace in many of the social sciences (Crossman, 2018) as the research community has expanded notions of who can be legitimate producers of knowledge (Sleeter, 2000). Different theories help researchers and practitioners to understand issues from different perspectives, but aspiring practitioners may face difficulty in making sense of this multiplicity of theories. Common across theories of educational leadership is the concept of theory as a set of ideas or principles that can inform the work of practitioners. Saugstad (2002) refers to the theory-practice relationship as a dualism such that theory is derived from practice and, at the same time, theory informs practice.

In educational leadership, the concept of practice refers to the work of practitioners. Cibulka (2009) asserts that "the practice community" (p. 461) is made up of those who have experience enacting the work, including current and former practitioners, differentiated from researchers engaged in scholarly inquiry. Practice can be understood as "an intricate mix of decisions and actions occurring on various levels and with varying time constraints" (Fazzaro *et al.*, 1994, p. 49). While this includes handling the technical aspects of leadership such as making sure teachers have supplies and students have schedules, it also involves school leaders addressing broader epistemological and pedagogical questions such as the purpose of schooling. Practice includes a wide range of actions for school leaders, from classroom observations and data analysis to relationship building (Lortie, 1998; Saugstad, 2002). Similarly, for Northouse (2018), practice referred to ways that individuals enact leadership.

In K-12 leadership preparation, faculty focus on practice through activities such as case studies and role-plays that require aspiring candidates to try out the actions they will undertake as leaders (Buller, 2017; Gordon *et al.*, 2016; Lortie, 1998). Descriptions of what leaders do in schools are used as teaching tools to help candidates develop understandings of theory by testing various theories against the cases (Gordon and Oliver, 2015; Northouse, 2018).

To illustrate the interconnections of theory and practice, scholars and leadership faculty have developed and argued for school leaders as "scholar–practitioner leaders" (e.g. Bailey, 2014; Bailey and Gautam, 2015; Candidates *et al.*, 2007; Horn, 2002; Jenlink, 2002; Mullen *et al.*, 2005; Slayton and Samkian, 2017). A scholar–practitioner leader "blends theory with practice" (Bailey and Gautam, 2015, p. 556). They use their knowledge and desire to learn while enacting their role as a building- or district-level leader (Candidates *et al.*, 2007). They use theory to inform practice, and their reflections on practice inform their understandings of theory (Horn, 2002). Several scholars have described the type of leaders who braid theory with practice. Specifically, Schön's (1987) concept of reflective practitioner, Freire's (1994) concept of progressive educator and Anderson and Saavedra's (2002) concept of practitioner researcher provide similar conceptions of leaders who engage with theory and practice in strongly connected ways that inform their leadership.

Understandings of theory-practice relationships in educational leadership

Despite the inherent interconnections of theory and practice, K-12 practitioners and leadership preparation faculty at times support an enactment of leadership that includes a gap between theory and practice; furthermore, they frame this gap as a problem that needs to be addressed or as a dichotomy that needs to be made unitary (e.g. Bailey and Gautam, 2015; Bogotch *et al.*, 2017; Mullen *et al.*, 2005; Saugstad, 2002). Even as the concept of scholar–practitioner is put forth as an ideal, scholars acknowledge the difficulty in actually being a scholar–practitioner leader in K-12 schools because of the differences in practical

and theoretical knowledge (Saugstad, 2002). Bailey and Gautam (2015) suggested renaming these as "spectator-knowledge" and "participant knowledge," while arguing that scholar–practitioner leaders need both types of knowledge. These critiques of the theory-practice gap suggest the gap is a result of different knowledge bases.

Another understanding of the gap involves the lack of time that practitioners have to engage in theory. In their leadership roles in schools, K-12 leaders report a lack of time necessary to focus on anything beyond the day-to-day, suggesting that it is not possible to act as a scholar–practitioner due to other leadership responsibilities (Mullen, 2003; Slayton and Samkian, 2017). This is not to say that leaders are not working from theory. Rather, leaders regularly draw upon what Sugrue (1997) referred to as lay theories that are developed based on candidates and leaders' personal experiences as students. Referred to by Harris (1994) as schemas – "subjective theories derived from one's experiences" (p. 31), principals may use their prior experiences to guide their leadership work (Spillane *et al.*, 2002; Woulfin and Weiner, 2017).

If theories are ways to organize a knowledge base built upon scientific principles (Heck and Hallinger, 2005), lay theories are more likely to be built upon personal experience and ideological belief (Argyris and Schön, 1974; Sugrue, 1997). Unless otherwise referenced, when we mention theory and potential interactions between theory and practice in educational leadership, we refer to the former understanding of the term, while acknowledging the reality of theories-in-use as phenomena that inform aspiring and current leaders' work.

This division of theory and practice is readily seen in discussions of leadership preparation programs in the USA (e.g. Bogotch *et al.*, 2017; Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2007). Students prefer hands-on, practical experiences in which they learn the "best practices" that they can apply in their own schools, and critique programs for focusing on theoretical ideas that leave them adrift in the face of real-time challenges (Cibulka, 2009; Murphy and Forsyth, 1999; Orr, 2006; Ng Foo Seong, 2013; Teitel, 2006). Orr (2006) reported that students "progress through discrete courses without connection to actual practice" (p. 493). Furthermore, Cibulka (2009) suggested that, since the 1980s, leadership programs in the USA focus on social science disciplinary knowledge, rather than practical knowledge that students could connect to outcomes at their school sites. Simply stated, leadership preparation programs are seen as not giving leadership candidates the practical tools needed for leaders to be successful in the field – how to be a principal or superintendent (Bogotch *et al.*, 2017; Teitel, 2006).

In addition to their quest for practical tools, students in leadership preparation programs are presented with an array of conflicting ways to think about, study and enact leadership (Eacott, 2017; Heck and Hallinger, 2005; Quantz *et al.*, 2017). Heck and Hallinger (2005) argued that educational leadership lacks a grand theory that explains the entirety of leading for improvement. Consequently, students encounter multiple and at times conflicting theories from various readings and coursework that may not fully explain their own specific, contextualized experiences in schools. According to Huber (2014), two common theories that aspiring and current leaders may encounter in the USA include transformational leadership (vs transactional leadership) and instructional leadership (vs managerial leadership). In addition, following from the No Child Left Behind Act and the increasing accountability context of K-12 public education in the USA (Halverson *et al.*, 2007), theories have flourished that support leaders in increasing educational opportunities and outcomes for all students, such as leadership for social justice (e.g. DeMatthews, 2018) and distributed leadership (e.g. Klar *et al.*, 2016). A growing number of scholars and practitioners have developed theories of leadership that center culture, such as culturally responsive school leadership (Khalifa *et al.*, 2016), or applied theories of race, such as critical race theory, to the field of educational leadership (Santamaría, 2014).

Finally, the separation between theory and practice in leadership preparation programs is institutionalized at the university level in the USA. In research universities, for example, two different career tracks designate faculty as focused more on practice or more on theory – former K-12 administrators are often employed as "clinical faculty" or "specialized professors," while traditionally-trained researchers who often have never served as a building- or district-level leader take on positions of "tenure track faculty" (Cosner *et al.*, 2015; Hackmann, 2007). Each faculty role is responsible for different aspects of leadership preparation programs. For example, in many institutions, tenure track faculty chair dissertations, while clinical faculty oversee site-based internships and field experiences.

In universities that have this model of bifurcated roles, the institutional environment supports and enforces this conceptualization that some faculty focus more on theory and others focus more on practice. Perhaps most notably, as both authors are tenure track faculty, we are aware that tenure track faculty who focus on "practice" and do not conduct and publish research also risk not making tenure – in other words, losing their jobs (Baughman and Goldman, 1999; Gallup and Svare, 2016). Institutional rewards and consequences support faculty in maintaining different approaches to their work with aspiring and practicing leaders.

In addition to clinical and tenure track faculty, different types of colleges and universities offer different institutionalized roles for educational leadership faculty (Carengie Classification for Institutions of Higher Education, 2017). In contrast to major research and doctoral institutions, which graduated 35 percent of the students earning master's degrees in 2003, the majority of master's students, most of whom simultaneously apply for state principal licensure, graduated from comprehensive or master's-only institutions (Baker *et al.*, 2007). Faculty at these types of institutions are expected to teach more classes each semester than those at research institutions, and they often have fewer expectations for research in terms of number of articles and place of publication (UC Regents, 2018). Educational leadership faculty at comprehensive institutions are more likely to have building- or district-level administrative experience (76 percent) compared with 57 percent at research institutions (Hackmann and McCarthy, 2011).

Finally, at all types of universities in the USA, adjunct or contingent faculty may also instruct leadership candidates and this is especially true for leadership programs with more than 500 students (Hackmann and McCarthy, 2013). Former and current practitioners serve in this role of part-time instructor, generally teaching one course a semester with the intention of training the next generation of administrators (Hackmann *et al.*, 2009). Thus, depending on the institution they attend, all leadership candidates may not experience the same division of theory and practice in terms of the faculty with whom they work.

Theoretical framework: institutional theory

Our review of the literature on theory and practice highlights ways that institutional contexts influence aspiring and current leaders' understandings of the relationship between the two. The bifurcated faculty roles at research institutions, the interest in preparation that focuses on practical tools, and the abundance of theories all create an environment in which their relationship is complicated and unclear. Because of this, institutional theory provides a powerful tool to more deeply examine how theory and practice interact in educational leadership. Accountability policy, leadership preparation programs, and leaders' practices are composed of, imbued with, and inextricably linked to institutions – the clusters of broad social and cultural beliefs that enable and constrain myriad facets of human activity. Institutional theory considers how institutions "provide stability and meaning to social life" (Scott, 2008, p. 428). In particular, institutions play a part in defining the role of professions, the value assigned to activities, and the taken-for-granted rules and norms of a domain (Scott, 2001).

At the macro-level, institutional theory highlights how structures, such as institutional logics, enable and constrain change (Scott, 2001). And at the micro-level, the theory can be used to analyze actors' practices during reform (Coburn, 2004; Scott and Davis, 2006). Institutional theory has utility for understanding the relationship between theory and practice because it attends to the macro-level rules and ideas (e.g. what are principals expected to do to be considered "good principals") and the micro-level ways in which actors respond to environmental pressures (e.g. how did a given principal respond during a budget crisis) (Scott, 2001; Scott and Davis, 2006).

As a strand of organizational theory, institutional theory is centrally concerned with the ideas, rules, norms, and actors enabling and constraining change processes (Scott, 2001). Institutional theory considers organizations to be situated in a larger field that is permeable to resources, ideas and pressures (Scott, 2001). Additionally, institutional theory has been used in the education literature to analyze the system and non-system actors involved in school reform as well as to explain schools' resistance to particular types of change (Coburn, 2004; Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Trujillo and Woulfin, 2014).

Legitimacy is a central aspect of institutional theory, addressing the notion that organizations must adhere to shared cultural meanings about their nature, regardless of efficiency or technical rationality (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). For a district to be seen as a "legitimate" provider of instruction for students, all of the individuals involved, including administrators, parents, students, the school board, and media, must have an understanding of the district as such. If a district acts in ways that stakeholders believe it should act, it is seen as legitimate. Further, according to institutional theory, being perceived as legitimate is more important than ensuring students meet any specific academic targets (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991). All of the different stakeholder groups make up the organizational field for school districts, as do external bodies, such as curriculum developers, the state board of education and teacher preparation programs. Both internal and external actors make up the "totality of relevant actors" (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991, p. 65) who see the district as providing what everyone understands as "school."

Structural isomorphism (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991) refers to ways that schools, which might begin as unique, revert toward a shared understanding of school. Tyack and Cuban (1995) demonstrate this with examples of innovations that failed, such as the Dalton Plan for individualized learning, because they challenged stakeholders' ideas of "school." All schools look relatively similar, not because their technical core is effective, but because looking like "school" makes them legitimate. Shared understandings of how schools should be within the organizational field constrain possibilities of how schools could actually be and also constrain possibilities for action counter to these understandings.

Supporting their sense of legitimacy, districts often operate as loosely coupled organizations in which their outward presentation of their mission portrays the expected ideal, but their day-to-day practices are disconnected from that ideal (Weick, 1976). Meyer and Rowan (1977) suggested districts often disconnect, or decouple, their technical core (teaching and learning) from their formal structure. The formal structure is needed to assure stakeholders that teaching and learning are occurring as expected, while the actual work of teachers, administrators and students may not be aligned to that formal structure.

Since Meyer and Rowan presented their initial view of schools as decoupled institutions, many theorists have investigated different aspects of districts and found that districts display multiple types of coupling. Diamond (2012), for example, studying tensions associated with high stakes testing policies, found partial coupling – some aspects of testing policy were strongly connected to teachers' practice, while other aspects were not impactful. Huerta and Zuckerman (2009) analysis of different models of charter schools led them to conclude that even though charter schools might appear to have more freedom to innovate, similar to traditional public schools, charter schools also respond to external demands in

symbolic ways to maintain legitimacy as "school." This is exemplified by charter schools' standardized school models and instructional curricula.

Hallett (2010) presented a view of coupling as dynamic – at different times, organizations may have tighter or looser coupling between their technical core and their external structure, between enacted strategies and their vision of themselves as an institution. In this vein, scholars now tend to emphasize that coupling should be treated not as "a static organizational state (e.g. a school that is tight or loosely coupled, or even decoupled), but as a process that organizations and their members engage in actively" (Hopkins, 2016, p. 576). This formulation encourages researchers to focus upon multiple mechanisms that couple ideas and rules to actors' practices inside universities, districts and schools (Coburn, 2004; Hopkins, 2016). It also promotes shifting away from the dichotomous view of loose vs tight coupling, in which tight couplings are considered "good."

We draw on the concepts of legitimacy, organizational field, structural isomorphism and coupling from institutional theory to explain the so-called gap between theory and practice in K-12 educational leadership. From this perspective, we consider how school leaders might engage with theory and practice with a degree of intentionality as a way to maintain legitimacy. These concepts are useful in examining something that is normally taken-for-granted – the gap between theory and practice.

Instead of assuming this gap exists as a real thing that is the result of a lack of knowledge of how theory and practice relate, we consider how practitioners might think about theory and practice from different perspectives. We do this not to advocate for teaching institutional theory as a primary theory in preparation programs, but rather to highlight ways that institutional contexts support and constrain different types of leadership. In analyzing vignettes of aspiring and current K-12 leaders, these concepts from institutional theory provide a different way to interpret and understand how leaders are using theory and practice instead of assuming a gap between the two.

Vignettes from our work: interactions between theory and practice in K-12 leadership

K-12 leadership students and building- and district-level leaders, instead of eschewing theory, may actively engage theory and practice to meet various ends within their institutional contexts. We demonstrate this with three vignettes drawn from our teaching and research experiences with leadership candidates and school and district leaders. Based upon our experiences, these vignettes are intended to provide examples of ways that aspiring and current leaders engage with theory and practice to support our reconceptualization of the theory-practice gap.

Vignette 1: decoupling racialized theories from teacher practice to maintain legitimacy

Peter Sanchez, superintendent of a wealthy suburban school district made up of 50 percent white and 50 percent black students, illustrated decoupling of the theory of color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2018) from practice in his equity-focused work around detracking. His district had a history of tracking, in which students were placed in a track or level of a course based on perceived ability (e.g. based on previous grades, teacher recommendation or standardized assessment scores). The district had been recently cited by the Office of Civil Rights for the underrepresentation of black students in advanced levels at the high school – they were disproportionality placed in the lower tracks. In discussing his district's challenges, Peter addressed issues of racism, colorblindness and teacher mindset, racialized theories of education, teaching and learning that impact students' daily educational experiences. He demonstrated an understanding of Bonilla-Silva's (2018) concept of color-blind racism as an explanation for how societal structures perpetuate racism in real ways that privileged white individuals and harmed

people of color, even without overt racist expressions or actions. For example, in discussing concerns about high school coursework, Peter reflected:

> The district entered into a voluntary agreement […] to resolve a compliance review that examined whether Black students are provided an equal opportunity to access and participate in advanced and higher-level learning opportunities […]. The issue of desegregation has been a stumbling point for the community. Leveling [tracking] has been a stumbling point. People have run for [school] board as levelers and non-levelers […].

However, in response to his institutional context and, in particular, vocal, white teachers and community members who supported the historical leveling policies, he focused his work with the principal and teachers around the district's framework for teaching, aligned to the state teacher evaluation system. He frequently spoke with them about collaborative learning and student-centered instruction, central parts of the framework, which – along with the state mandate – did not specifically require administrators to address inequities or racism in any substantive way.

Peter's framing of his concerns about the high school in relation to student-centered learning with school staff was not connected to the racialized theories of student placement that he shared with one of the authors. In framing this issue without addressing race, Peter decoupled race from educational practice in a way that was more in line with expectations of dominant voices in the school and community. Conversations with Peter highlight that his decoupling of theory from practice was not a result of a gap in his knowledge of how race impacted students' opportunities. Rather, this decoupling was a response to an institutional environment in which focusing on race raised significant challenges from teachers and the school board. While his work may appear to show a gap in theory and practice, from an institutional perspective it alternatively showed a school leader navigating a specific context and working to maintain legitimacy as a district leader from the perspective of teachers and community members who were "levelers" benefiting from inequitable policies.

It would be easy to characterize Peter as a leader who avoided race. However, our analysis of this administrator's actions through the lens of institutional theory shows how he decoupled racialized theory and practice in his work with constituents as a mechanism to survive in the institutional environment, maintain legitimacy across a broader swath of his constituents, and build support for future, perhaps more racially explicit, leadership practice.

Vignette 2: loose couplings of university theories to internship activities

Rochelle Lewis[1] was in her second and final year of Blue University's Principal Preparation Program (PPP), working toward a master's degree and state licensure. She had an internship with the principal of a local elementary school, and she was taking two additional courses, one on school climate and culture and one on educational policy. In her internship, she observed the principal work with the school leadership team to assess its language arts curriculum in preparation for its upcoming curriculum review cycle, while her course on school climate and culture directed her to readings about culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) (e.g. Ladson-Billings, 1995). For one of her assignments, Rochelle was expected to identify aspects of CRP in her internship experience. In preparing for the assignment, Rochelle shared that:

> […] there's a lot of reading of the ways schools could work and all the frameworks that have been used to improve schools […] we kept hearing about these different ways of approaching leadership and these different ideas for the best way to lead a school and the reasons why they help […] It's a lot in two years.

Though she learned a wide array of approaches to improving schools (see Table I), she could not always find ways to connect the readings on specific frameworks or theories to her

Course	Theory	Practice-based applications
Administrative leadership	Transformational leadership (Bass, 1990)	Aspiring leaders gain skills in creating a transformational vision
Education policy	Framing theory (Benford and Snow, 2000; Goffman, 1974): sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995)	Aspiring leaders gain skills in framing a new instructional program
Supervision	Adult learning (Mezirow, 1997)	Aspiring leaders gain skills in designing informal professional learning opportunities for teachers
Organizational leadership	Data-based decision making (Mandinach, 2012); organizational change (Argyris, 1993)	Aspiring leaders gain skills in analyzing evidence on educational practices and planning activities to improve results
Curriculum and instruction	Constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978)	Aspiring leaders gain skills in analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of a curriculum for meeting the needs of all learners
School climate and culture	Critical race theory (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995); culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995)	Aspiring leaders remain attuned to a community's assets and how they contribute to students' educational experiences

Table I.
Summary of theories embedded in the coursework of a sample principal preparation program

clinical experiences, such as her internship. However, as a committed student, she set out on this assignment with her usual enthusiasm.

Rochelle attended several meetings with the principal and the school leadership team, but she felt "always out of time, so it's hard to find that time to ask why the principal did what they did." She took notes of her observations, had occasional brief conversations with the principal and then began her written assignment. In discussing CRP, in particular, Rochelle wrote:

> I have witnessed many positive experiences with language differences. For example one of the kindergarten teachers would learn the Ukrainian word for each lesson theme to connect with a Ukrainian student who was learning English. Another teacher has two Chinese students in her class, and the two students help her create a chart with Chinese symbols of key vocabulary words […]. These small actions reinforce the fact [that this school] celebrates difference and views it in a positive light.

In her assignment, Rochelle identified examples of school personnel recognizing students' linguistic strengths in her discussion of culturally relevant practices. While this is one component of CRP that is important, it was the only component that she discussed. Rochelle wrote about what she observed – individual teachers taking "small actions" during the school day to support students. She did not include any notes from observations of department team meetings or leadership team meetings, in which the team might have considered how the curriculum supported culturally and linguistically diverse students. She also omitted any discussion of instructional practices and school policies that connected to the school's language arts curriculum, nor did she discuss how, if it all, the principal engaged teachers in thinking about culture, learning and curriculum. That is, in her written responses, Rochelle was not demonstrating a thorough or nuanced understanding of CRP.

In reading Rochelle's response, it would be easy for an instructor to assume that this student had a somewhat basic understanding of CRP in that she was focusing on individual teachers' interactions with students. That is, Rochelle was not considering instructional practices or school policies that connected to the school's language arts curriculum, nor did she discuss how the principal and leadership team thought about the curriculum in terms of addressing student achievement while also helping students to develop "critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 469). However, another interpretation of Rochelle's response is

that she did not see any evidence of CRP as a theoretical framework for the school leadership team or in the principal's thinking, but because she was instructed to identify aspects of CRP in her internship experience, she wrote about what she saw. The disconnect, in this case, was not about Rochelle's understanding, but related to the expectations of her preparation program (with CRP as a theoretical foundation, at least in this class) and the workings of her internship (with a principal drawing on theories of change management, e.g. Argyris, 1993).

CRP and other frameworks and theories that center culture and race in the educational process, while increasingly common in leadership preparation and research on educational leadership, may be less common in terms of current leaders' work. School and district leaders may be more likely to draw on technical or rational frameworks that are perceived as neutral as ways to provide objective rationales for difficult decisions (Khalifa *et al.*, 2014). As 2014 stated during a class discussion, "No one ever got fired for making a technical-rational decision." In this sense, the concept of structural isomorphism may be at play – even as individual leaders, researchers, or preparation faculty develop, learn about and adopt theories that center culture or race, the expectations of how schools should be and what leaders should do virtually demand them to adopt seemingly objective theories.

Vignette 3: replacing lay theories with new theories

Angel Lee is the principal of a neighborhood middle school in a district with shifting demographics. When he began working in the district, it was almost 90 percent white, and ten years later, the student population became 50 percent white, 25 percent Asian, and 25 percent Latinx. The increasing diversity began in the elementary schools, and his middle school has just begun to see the change in student population in its enrollment. Angel is also a student at the State University's District-Level Leadership Program, working on a doctorate and superintendent licensure.

As part of a course on school reform, Angel was introduced to framing theory. Framing theory (Benford and Snow, 2000; Goffman, 1974) provides concepts for understanding the role and power of strategic communication in change processes. This theory elucidates leaders' role and work in packaging and propagating certain sets of ideas to mobilize others (Benford and Snow, 2000). In the course, Angel, along with his peers, engaged in a role-play activity to apply framing theory to how they might communicate the impact of the district's budget crisis on their school's operations for the following year. Angel took on the role of a school principal who had to announce severe cuts to the school's music program. After the activity, in which he tried to apply principles of framing theory to determine what he would actually say to teachers and how he would package those ideas for teachers, Angel shared that "it was hard to keep the focus on the positive parts of the change and to just not blurt out that we're losing music class." Even though the theory pointed to specific ways a leader could share negative news, Angel struggled to do so, instead drawing on his lay theory of communication, almost "blurting" out the bad news.

Several weeks later, for a different assignment, Angel and his class completed an analysis of the local superintendent's framing of a dual language immersion program to support the increasing number of linguistically diverse students. Angel and his classmates critiqued the leader's low-quality framing. Angel reflected that, "[He] told us so late. And [he] couldn't answer all the questions [about the program]." Building off of this, the class had a conversation as to how and why district leaders could frame initiatives related to culture in ways that align with the tenets of framing theory to increase community and faculty support. Angel also considered how he could frame the programmatic changes that would be occurring at his school in the following year. Angel reflected that "I need to let the teachers tell me what they want to know about our curriculum and what their barriers are," instead of assuming that he knew what their

concerns would be. This indicated that Angel was beginning to transfer principles from framing theory into his own leadership activities. More broadly, it showed that Angel was becoming aware of the interconnections between framing theory, school reform and the increasing diversity that his school was experiencing.

By applying concepts from framing theory to course activities, assignments and his work as principal, Angel was learning a new theoretical understanding of communication that is in contrast to his prior lay theory around communication. Learning the new theory and applying it is not always an easy or linear process, as Angel struggled with the role-playing activity but found it easier to critique another leader's progress. The more he learned about and applied the theory, the more Angel noticed new things about other leaders' communication. He has found that it can be challenging for leaders to communicate with clarity and timeliness to diverse audiences and stakeholders. Angel's connecting the principles of framing theory to his practice as principal and learning as superintendent candidate had ups and downs as he moved between what he knew and what he was learning and experiencing.

Angel's emerging understanding and application of framing theory enabled coupling of the theory to his communicative practices. The challenges he faced in this process illustrate his move from a theory based on his personal experiences to a theory grounded in a knowledge base around change. His initial theories made sense to him. However, as Angel learned more about framing theory, he was able to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of his theories-in-use around communication. The multiple class and leadership opportunities to engage with framing theory served as a motivator for him to begin to couple the principles of framing theory with his communication as principal.

Discussion and implications

Analyzing these vignettes through the lens of institutional theory enables a reconceptualizing of the theory-practice gap not as a deficit in leaders' knowledge but as a functioning of the institutional contexts in which they work. K-12 leaders and leadership candidates engage theory and practice as more or less tightly coupled concepts to function as legitimate leaders (see Table II). These vignettes illustrate how coupling is a process within K-12 leadership that occurs in particular institutional contexts in relation to specific aspects of leadership. At times, current and aspiring leaders may intentionally couple or decouple theory from practice, while in other instances, the institutional environments in which they work create opportunities for theory and practice to be more directly engaged. Importantly, it is clear that when school leaders decouple theory from

Table II. Overview of institutional theory in the vignettes

	Vignette focus	Components of institutional theory	Institutional context
Superintendent Peter Sanchez	Not discussing racialized theories in teacher and community communications	Legitimacy decoupling	White teachers and community members advancing the status quo, so Peter decouples to maintain legitimacy
Aspiring principal, Rochelle Lewis	Looking for evidence of CRP that may not exist in her internship	Structural isomorphism	Rochelle has difficulty applying a theory to her internship, when the context of her internship does not provide clear examples of the theory
Current principal and aspiring superintendent, Angel Lee	Applying framing theory in his work with classmates and his school	Emerging coupling	Angel learns a new way, based in theory, to approach communication and begin to apply it to his practice

practice, they may be doing so to serve as legitimate providers of K-12 educational leadership; they may be working in schools that have aligned themselves to how schools "are," making alternate approaches to schooling less likely to be adopted. Furthermore, leadership candidates engage in a university system that has decoupled theory and practice in various ways – even if candidates engage in coursework that advances a notion of a scholar–practitioner, for example, they may do so within a context of tenure-track and clinical professors that clearly delineates the work of theory and the work of practice. Within this context, candidates engage in individual courses that advance different theories of education, often without explicitly asking candidates to consider how theories relate, support each other or contradict each other. At the same time, their engagement in course activities provide candidates with multiple and varied opportunities to apply theoretical concepts to the activities they participate in through internships, supporting couplings of theory and practice.

The leaders and candidates illustrated in these vignettes bolster our argument that K-12 leaders and candidates do not necessarily exhibit a weakness in their learning because they do not connect theory and practice. Rather, different aspects of their institutional contexts, as Scott (2001) suggests, push them to engage theory and practice in different ways at different times. In part, this is likely a result of different institutional contexts that they encounter – K-12 public and education and university-based leadership preparation, while overlapping in many key ways, each constitutes their own specific function and place in US society (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991). The university context, for example, defines which professors engage in clinical practice and which are expected to conduct empirical research based in theory. The community context in which a district is situated also places pressures on leaders to engage in equity-focused reform in ways that maintain their legitimacy as school leaders (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991).

Additionally, for leadership candidates asked to observe theories at work in their internships, they may be limited by what they have the opportunity to observe – observing a weak framing of an initiative, for example, may lead them to misunderstand aspects of framing or even to unsuccessfully apply framing theory in their own practice. This coupling of theory and practice may be tighter or looser, based on what candidates observe in their placements, illustrating that coupling is not a static, one-time event, but a fluid process (Hopkins, 2016).

Implications for leadership preparation

When examining pre-service and in-service leadership preparation and professional development, institutional theory can support educational researchers in developing more complex views of the challenges that leaders face in coupling theory and practice. Schools are complex organizational systems, and aspiring and current leaders need to understand this complexity and what leadership means in these systems. To support future and current leaders, leadership preparation programs need to ensure that their students understand their institutional contexts and the types of theories and actions that are likely to garner opposition, as illustrated by Peter in the first vignette. As leaders work to move districts from color-neutral perspectives to more complex understandings of how race impacts students' educational experiences, a leader being public about theories, even those that offer powerful explanations for the results a district is achieving, may not function as effective practice.

At the same time, leadership preparation faculty and candidates must maintain a deep understanding of theories of educational leadership so that they do not automatically fall back on lay theories that are based on their own personal experiences in schools. While the educational leadership knowledge base is vast and at times contradictory, disregarding this base and disregarding theory as not practical does not mean that leaders are not using

theory in making decisions – they are just doing so unconsciously (Argyris and Schön, 1974; Sugrue, 1997). Neo-institutional theorists suggest that administrators' lay theories, having been developed within their institutional contexts and often unconsciously, are more likely to support leadership action that maintains the status quo rather than challenge it. That is, administrators will reinforce existing practices instead of acting in significantly different ways to catalyze change (Coburn, 2004). When aspiring leaders, such as Rochelle, observe seemingly successful school leaders, such as her principal, engage in curriculum adoption or any process without attending to culture, for example, they implicitly learn that this type of leadership is not only acceptable but effective.

Leadership preparation programs and professional development organizations can support leaders' understanding of theory and practice by developing and actively implementing an overarching framework of leadership and K-12 schooling that supports leaders as reflexive practitioners or scholar–practitioners. Instead of a piecemeal, course-by-course approach, an overarching framework, even while introducing students to the variety of theories in the field, can make clear what theory is and how it is connected to practice in meaningful ways. While it is not in the scope of this paper to develop this framework, we suggest that an overarching framework for educational leadership include: an understanding of schools and districts as institutions situated in specific contexts; exposure to and application of the range of theories that exist and that are emerging in the fields of K-12 teaching, learning and leadership, and discussion of the reason for multiple, at times contradictory, theories; the role of lay theories in leadership action; and praxis around social justice and equity.

Implications also suggest that leadership preparation programs, in exposing students to a range of theories (second component of the framework), support aspiring school and district leaders' development by providing multiple opportunities for learning both the tenets and concrete applications of various theories, as Angel experienced in learning about framing theory. It is apparent that aspiring leaders benefit from experiencing several touchpoints with a theory, including not only readings and discussion, but also reflections on how the theory is surfacing in their sites and how they are instantiating portions of the theory. Further, these opportunities to engage with theory should be spread over time so that aspiring leaders can refine their definitions of and competencies toward theories. We propose that there are benefits to social, collaborative forms of learning about theories in the field of educational leadership. In particular, if aspiring leaders share ideas and practices from different schools and contexts (first component of the framework), they can assemble an intricate portrait of the theory and further elaborate their own stance toward the theory (third component of the framework). In sum, leadership preparation programs should carefully design multiple learning opportunities around theory. These learning opportunities should be transparent about the obstacles to fully transferring tenets of theory to on-the-ground leadership work, particularly in relation to leading for equity, social justice and change (fourth component of a potential framework).

To address the challenges that aspiring leaders face when they are asked to glean understandings of a theory from their internships in particular, we note that leadership preparation programs should use innovative pedagogical methods, including case studies and video analysis of leadership practice. These methods are especially well-suited to support learning regarding the instantiation of infrequent or uncommon leadership practices tied to theories. For example, a case study on how a district leader collaborated with male vs female principals could provide opportunities for discussion of gender in leadership, introducing leadership candidates to feminist theory and its applications in educational administration (Blackmore, 2013). And, a video of a principal leading a meeting with representatives from community-based organizations could provide opportunities to analyze the leader's framing of the school's cultural assets. Cases and videos concentrating

on oftentimes hidden strands of leadership would provide the grist for robust class activities and assignments that encourage aspiring leaders to integrate theory and practice.

Finally, we assert that policymakers who create policy around leadership preparation should hold a theoretical framework for leadership as well as an understanding of leadership practice. In turn, policies and guidelines can and should be transparently rooted in theory. In contrast, if policy is developed and implemented as discrete and disconnected mandates or expectations, it is likely to create disjointed understandings of what leadership should entail. Further, it is likely to pile onto other pre-existing mandates rather than cohere to motivate change in a particular direction (Honig and Hatch, 2004). Thus, we argue that state policymakers and accrediting bodies involved in leadership preparation expect leadership preparation programs to present an overarching framework for candidates that involves them learning both about the range of theories that exist and also about the expectations that different institutional environments have for different uses of theory in connection to practice. Through this requirement, leadership preparation faculty would ideally engage in their own conversations about theory and practice in educational leadership and how their program's different courses combine to present an overall understanding of leadership.

Implications for theory

We argue that the theory-practice gap, while often perceived as something negative, can have certain benefits within particular contexts. The theory-practice gap does not signal something wrong with students or university-based programs. Instead, we encourage scholars interested in the interconnections of theory and practice to consider why aspiring and current leaders, in education and in other fields, intentionally couple or decouple theory and practice. We point out that questions remain about how and why students and leaders couple theory to practice in variegated ways.

Just as the supposed gap in theory and practice is not necessarily negative, we also raise the question of whether decoupling is always negative. Given the institutional contexts of research institutions for example, and given the reality that faculty come to leadership preparation with different backgrounds, it might make sense for different faculty to focus on different aspects of preparation. We discuss this distinction in faculty as an example of different roles and how they are institutionalized – seemingly almost impervious to change – and as a problem as such, we advocate future theoretical discussions that continue to challenge the normative conversation of the theory-practice gap as by definition bad. Researchers of educational leadership need to consider reasonable ways to apply theory in a manner that translates to leadership preparation and practice. Theoretical research is most beneficial when it includes implications for a range of actors in the education field, including district leaders, principals and preparation faculty. These activities could lead to stronger couplings between theory and practice to better prepare educational leaders to catalyze change in substantive ways.

For researchers of institutional theory in the field of educational leadership, this analysis suggests directions for future research into different types of couplings and their consequences, depending on both the leader and the district/school. Perhaps more importantly, we begin to illuminate how concepts of institutional and organizational theory can be taught in order to shift the practices of change agents. In this manner, we contribute to the field of higher education pedagogy. In this future line of research, the emphasis on current and aspiring leaders' agency as potential change agents is critical. Where institutional theory often seems to suggest that little possibility for change exists, theories such as sensemaking that are grounded in institutional theory but focus on individuals' micro-level processes (Weber and Glynn, 2006) can inform a more developed understanding of the role of agency in leaders' engagement with theory and practice.

Conclusion

Instead of assuming there is something amiss with leadership preparation, candidates or current K-12 leaders, we argue for greater understandings of the institutional environments in which candidates learn and leaders work. What are the expectations of their communities and teachers? What types of leadership are allowed and accepted, and what types of leadership put school leaders under fire? What knowledge is deemed relevant and necessary in different educational contexts? Even as K-12 leadership preparation faculty work to support students in developing complex understandings of the interconnections of theory and practice, they also need to develop complex understandings of how the K-12 institutional environment informs the work of leaders in enacting these interconnections. We ask that leadership preparation faculty, ourselves included, consider when and under what conditions aspiring leaders engage with and transfer ideas from different theories. This has the potential to encourage faculty to construct innovative coursework and learning activities to foster deeper learning that could benefit future leadership work as well as positive outcomes for schools, students and communities.

Note

1. Rochelle and Angel, in the following vignette, are composite characters drawn from our teaching; all of the quotes are actual quotes from the leadership students who are part of the composites.

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