Conceptual Model of Educational Planning and Program Evaluation: Addressing Deficit Thinking at the Top

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Valencia (1997) described deficit thinking as a "person-centered explanation of school failure among individuals as linked to group membership…The deficit thinking framework holds that poor schooling performance is rooted in students' alleged cognitive and motivational deficits" (p. 9). This is a belief that the individual student or the student's cultural identity is to blame, and removes any responsibility for the student's failure from the teacher, the school, or the systems that guide them. Nelson and Guerra (2014) reported that, although research exists on deficit thinking and cultural competency, they found that only a few teacher preparation programs successfully address cultural competency in preparing educators for the field. As a result, teachers are entering the field with a deficit-thinking model of culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse (CLED) students. Nelson and Guerra also noted that most research addressing deficit-thinking focuses on pre-service teachers. Thus, there is a gap in research addressing educational leaders' perceptions of CLED students. This is especially true when examining how an educator's deficit thinking may be applied in practice (Nelson & Guerra, 2014). García and Guerra (2004) concurred that there is insufficient research investigating practices, perceptions, and ideologies of educators who hold deficit beliefs about CLED students. As a result, deficit thinking is perpetuated through new attempts for school improvement.

The conceptual model of educational planning and evaluation presented in this piece will suggest an approach to alter the deficit thinking of school district leaders such as superintendents, school board members, principals, and district central staff. Skrla and Scheurich (2001) suggested that the deficit thinking that pervades classrooms may be shaped or perpetuated by the larger deficit thinking that is used to explain school failures district-wide. School district leaders, who often come

from the classroom, attain leadership roles and bring their pre-existing deficit thinking, which reinforces district mindsets at-large. Skrla and Scheurich believed that deficit thinking at the district leadership level is an unchallenged paradigm that has been used to justify the perpetual underperformance of CLED students. This conceptual model aims to provide a strategic plan to address the "mental models" of district leaders in a school district that has encountered persistent achievement gap data and been accused of having racist educators and policies (Senge, 1990, p. 8). Senge stated, "Mental models are deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures or images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action" (p. 8). Historically, achievement gaps have been identified to be a fault of the CLED students and racist policies have been blamed on individual educators, instead of examining the mental model of the district at-large.

Context

The context for this conceptual model is a large southern school district that serves urban, suburban, and rural communities. The district has 90 schools and nearly half of them are identified as Title I based on students' free or reduced lunch statuses. The district has identified the discrepancy of test scores between lower performing subgroups of African American, English Language Learners, and low socioeconomic status students and their White, more affluent counterparts. The state mandated district strategic plan has been designed with the intent to shrink the achievement gap through various interventions. The district has targeted specific schools to provide new and innovative curriculum approaches to address *the deficit*. They have provided academic content area leaders to work with the teachers and students to improve their performances on the state standardized tests. They have purchased licenses to expensive online programs to provide additional time for content area practice. Even with these interventions, the achievement gap has persisted. The district has not addressed the potential deficit thinking-model through which these choices have been made. Thus, the district has not considered the mental model of deficit thinking as a potential factor in the ongoing achievement gap.

In addition, the district has made recent national news due to racially charged behavior by students and faculty at multiple schools. The Office of Civil Rights has been contacted to investigate racially biased policies and procedures in

the district. Multiple lawsuits have been filed on behalf of families and groups of students who have felt discriminated against in the district. The mission of the district includes raising the achievement gap, and the concept that *all children can learn*. However, no public actions have been taken to address the deficit thinking in the leaders or teachers, demonstrating that the district does not necessarily believe that all children can, in fact, *learn*. This conceptual model will demonstrate a method to work toward altering the mental models of the district leadership, eventually leading to school-based change and, ultimately, a district-wide culturally competent mental model of educational reform.

Model

The Addressing Educational Leaders' Deficit Thinking Model (see Figure 1) begins at the leadership level utilizing strategies from multiple change models, two strategic planning models, and a "Five Way Accountability" model utilized in Texas to address educational inequity (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001, p. 242). In addition, elements from culturally responsive teaching strategies and Equity Audits were included to make the model more comprehensive (Skrla, McKenzie, & Scheurich, 2009).

Change Models

The first step in creating the model was to determine its direction. The Change Acceleration Process Model (CAPM) was selected because of the forward momentum of moving right to the left (Becker, Huselid, & Ulrich, 2001). The initial start of the CAPM is from an existing state heading toward a new state. In the CAPM, the leader is to create a shared need. In the Addressing Educational Leaders' Deficit Thinking model, an antecedent originates the shared need. In the case of this district, it is the legal and public outcry regarding historically biased and racist institutionalized mental models that guide the district at large.

Addressing Educational Leaders' Deficit Thinking model utilizes the eight steps presented in Kotter's Change Model (2012). Skrla and Scheurich (2001) demonstrated in the *Five Way Accountability* model how a state accountability system could be used to support a district transformation to serve students equally. Kotter's (2012) model starts with creating a sense of urgency. In the case of the district, the antecedent is the investigation of the Office of Civil Rights. Kotter's model also includes the need for coalition building, which demonstrates a method to engage stakeholders. Bryson (2011) asserted that satisfying stakeholders

and creating a public value allows organizations to find ways to implement change to provide services for an often fickle public.Table 1) illustrates the alignment between Kotter's (2012) model and the five-ways process from Skrla and Scheurich (2001).

The target district creates a sense of urgency by providing irrefutable evidence that CLED students are not being served equally district-wide. Engaging key stakeholders will allow the district to form a coalition of leaders to lead the changes. Many districts would be hesitant to take on this topic given that it examines educational inequity for racially and socioeconomically diverse populations. Shifting the risk to the state department of education allows for the local stakeholders to address the problem without the added concern of litigiousness. The Five-Ways model (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001) encourages school leaders to identify exemplars, which includes establishing a vision of the change, communicating the vision, empowering others to act, and creating methods for success. Kotter's (2012) model allows for time to build on the change that

Table 1. *Alignment between models*

Kotter's Change Model	Five Ways Accountability Model
1. Create a Sense of Urgency	1. Provide highly visible evidence that districts are not service all children equally
2. Form a Guiding Coalition	2. Shift political risk from the district to the state department of education.
3. Create a Vision	3. Seek out exemplars of successful classrooms.
4. Communicate the Vision	
5. Empower others to Act on the Vision	
6. Create Quick Wins	
7. Build on the Change	4. Reevaluate deficit views and develop anti-deficit orientations.
8. Institutionalize the Change	5. Drive increased high expectations and higher goals for academic achievement for all children as incremental success.

Note. Adapted from Kotter, J. P. (2012) and Skrla, L., & Scheurich, J. J. (2001).

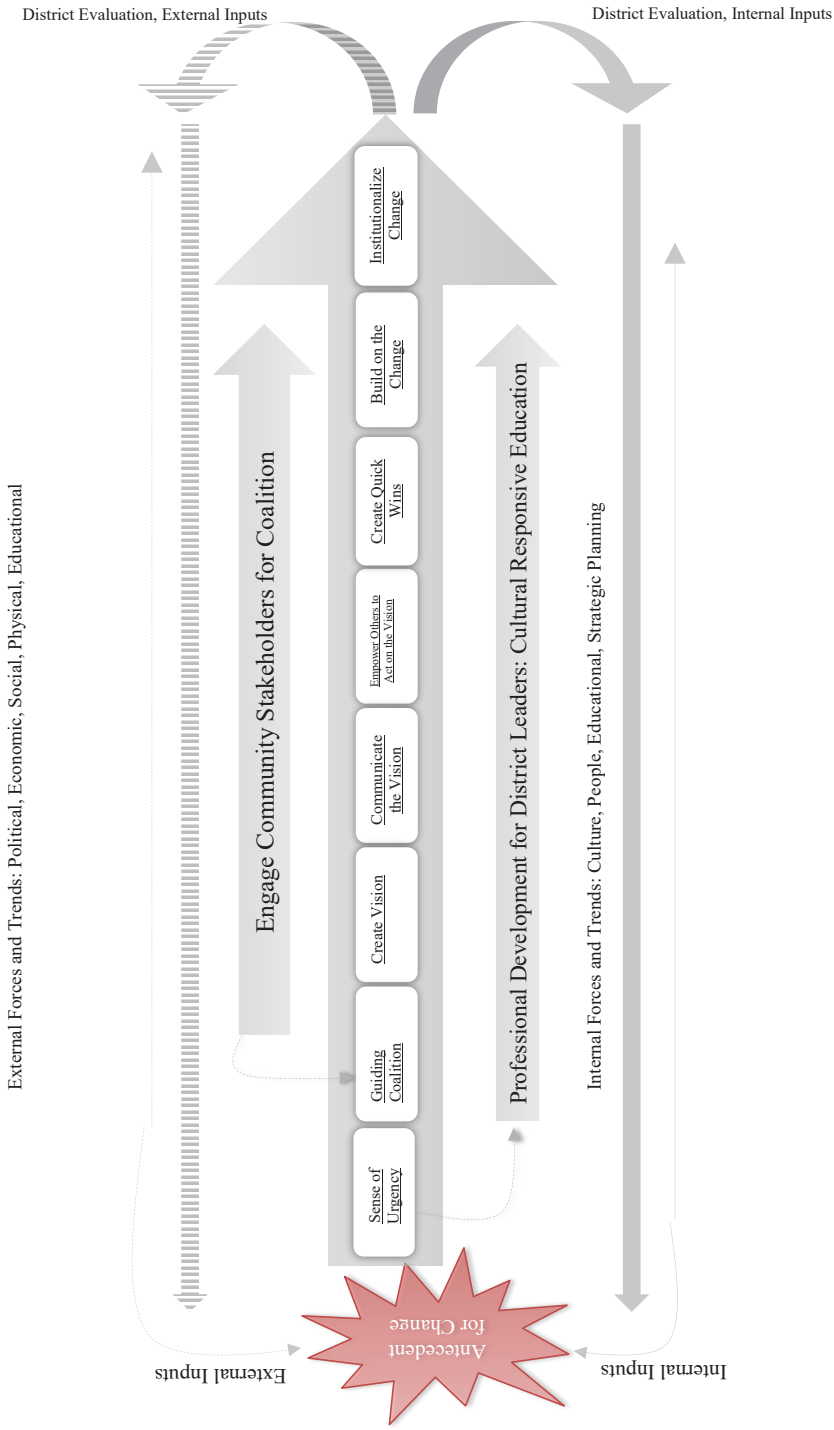

Figure 1. Addressing Educational Leaders' Deficit Thinking Model.

aligns with the Five-Ways process of developing anti-deficit orientations through cultural competency and responsiveness professional development. The final Kotter step of institutionalizing change aligns with the Five-Ways step of perpetual action toward increased high expectations and goals for CLED students. This will eventually lead to the on-going process of challenging deficit thinking.

Strategic Plans

In the Addressing Educational Leaders' Deficit Thinking model, the process includes two forward paths that are ongoing throughout the process. The first occurs after the first step of creating a sense of urgency. This process is called "Professional Development for District Leaders: Culturally Responsive Education." This process would provide intensive cultural competency training for all district leaders, starting with the superintendent, to address the mental models that guide district decision-making. This ongoing design is similar to the CAPM where *Leading Change* and *Changing Systems and Structures* are continuous throughout the process (Becker, Huselid, & Ulrich, 2001). Bryson (2011) cited The Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board example that the purpose of strategic planning is not making plans, but changing how decision makers think about change. Chrispeels, Burke, Johnson, and Daly (2008) demonstrated that collaborative professional development with leadership of a school system and the school based leadership teams resulted in shared mental models. The outcome goal for the "Professional Development for District Leaders: Cultural Responsive Education" is for the leaders of the target district to change their mental models from deficit thinking based to a dynamic thinking model, and bridge this model to school based leadership.

The Addressing Educational Leaders' Deficit Thinking model also uses solid and dashed lines to indicate internal versus external inputs as demonstrated in Bryson's (2011) Strategy Change Cycle (p. 44). This allows for external influences to have impact on the process, thus including stakeholders outside of the organization. It also accounts for internal influences by acknowledging the resources, people, and competencies in the organization. Additionally, the Addressing Educational Leader's Deficit Thinking model uses directional arrows to facilitate a forward motion, but also time to reflect, evaluate, and assess the progress and, if necessary, return to the beginning and start anew.

Throughout the model, suggested strategies are embedded

in the rendering as potential options to use for each step. These strategies are from Holcomb (2009) and Skrla, McKenzie, and Scheurich (2009). Although these tools are not necessary, they illustrate tangible approaches for addressing deficit thinking models through a proactive change process.

Implications

The potential change that this model could initiate can have rippling effects across a district that has been ineffective at providing equitable education. By choosing a top-down method, the assumption is that the attitudes, biases, and dispositions of the district leaders influence decisions that are made for the entire district. If these attitudes stem from a deficit-thinking model, the district wide actions can have similarly low expectations that limit opportunities and access for CLED students. However, if the mental models of the leadership stem from a dynamic perspective, or the leaders demonstrate a commitment to anti-bias and anti-deficit thinking, decisions will follow suit. If school-based leaders follow a dynamic-based thinking model, the school based policy and procedures will reflect this. Changes in the district might include new approaches to professional development, discipline policies, and family and student engagement approaches. Chrispeels et al. (2008) demonstrated that if the mental models of the district and the school leadership teams are aligned, successful school reform could have a coherent approach. Through their multi-district study, Skrla and Scheurich (2001) illustrated how a state accountability system and a strategic approach to "displacing deficit thinking" can have positive impacts on academic achievement and equitable services and influence a district-wide shift in deficit thinking (p. 238). The potential change for CLED students could mean shrinking the achievement gap, having culturally responsive educators that enact policies and procedures that do not limit but support diverse students.

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