

PRINCIPAL AND PROFESSOR PERSPECTIVES ON PRINCIPAL PREPARATION, PROGRAM REDESIGN, AND EDUCATIONAL PLANNING

ARVIN D. JOHNSON

Kennesaw State University

STEPHANIE JAMES

Jacksonville University

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this reflective research was to highlight professor and principal perspectives on the most impactful principal preparation components. These perspectives were aligned to literature in the field and used to inform educational planning during a leadership program redesign at a small, private university in the southeastern region of the United States. Eight participants were interviewed to gain their unique perspectives of what should be included in the program redesign. Results were coded and organized into themes by participant group. The themes were then used as reflection points to inform program redesign and educational planning.

INTRODUCTION

University educational leadership programs play a critical role in preparing aspiring school leaders (Hess & Kelly, 2007; Mendels, 2016). Universities offering programs that lead to state certification in educational leadership typically align their programs to state requirements (Johnson, 2016). Each state is responsible for developing initial principal preparation standards, articulating guiding policies, and supporting the preparation needs of local school districts (Manna, 2015). In addition to different state standards, there are nearly 100,000 public schools in the United States all with different leadership needs (Snyder, 2018). Several factors including school quantity, state educational leadership certification policies, and a changing local contexts impact leadership preparation. These factors accentuate the needs for deliberate and ongoing educational planning among university faculty and district-based professionals.

Empirical research has supported several elements of effective principal preparation. Instructional leadership is an area of focus that is essential to principal preparation programs (Taylor-Backor & Gordon, 2015). Other critical areas of principal preparation include data analysis and usage, human resources, school law, budget, community relations, school culture, and effective internships (Crow & Whiteman, 2016; Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Hess & Kelly, 2007; Perrilla, 2014; Quin, Deris, Bishoff, & Johnson, 2015). In addition, internships or field experiences are a very common aspect of principal preparation programs nationally and internationally (Anderson & Reynolds, 2015; Campbell & Parker, 2016). In this research, we examined faculty and principal perspectives of principal preparation to inform redesign efforts in the educational leadership department at a university in the southeastern region of the United States. These perspectives were interpreted and analyzed based on existing empirical research, and allowed the researcher practitioners to reflect upon their initial thoughts for planning a program redesign.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This reflection research was based on several established concepts in the area of educational leadership. These concepts helped the practitioner researchers frame the study and provided critical context for an educational leadership program redesign. The conceptual framework of this research was based on chasms in leadership preparation perspectives, the need for multiple perspectives in leadership preparation, inconsistencies in beliefs of the effectiveness of university principal preparation programs, the notion that school leadership has an overall impact on school success, and andragogy.

Chasms have long existed between and among practitioner and researcher perspectives of principal preparation and professional learning (Bowers, 2017; Dimmock, 2016; Labaree, 2003; McCall, 2014). These perspective chasms exist in a variety of areas to include effective leadership practices, preparation, and important local factors (Hallinger, 2018). One way to begin to reduce these chasms is to examine different perspectives, highlight gaps, and seek ways to align and synthesize the perspectives (Coburn & Penuel, 2018). Opposing empirical and practical perspectives warrant further research in the area of planning, designing, and implementing effective leadership preparation programs.

Despite these contrasting perspectives, research suggests that collaboration and planning among colleges, local educational agencies, and state department of education is critical to the development of effective leadership preparation programs (Browne-Ferrigno, 2011; Johnson, 2016; Lazaridou, 2009). Bolden (2016) suggested that empirical and practical assumptions should be considered when designing leadership preparation curriculum. Faculty in effective educational leadership programs usually collaborate with other educational stakeholders to ensure that curriculum and learning connects theory and practice (Cosner, Tozer, Zavitovsky, & Whalen, 2015; Reames & Slear, 2018). Collaboration should be maintained among university educational leadership faculty and local school district employees (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012). Accordingly, this collaboration underscores the importance of ensuring that educational leadership program planning is informed through the lenses of school district leaders and university faculty.

University principal preparation program effectiveness has been highly contentious. Faculty redesigning university leadership programs should examine contrasting empirical data regarding the effectiveness of university principal preparation programs (Johnson, 2016). Some empirical research has underlined inadequacies of principal preparation programs in the United States (Farkas, Johnson, & Duffet, 2003; Hess & Kelly, 2007; Levine, 2005; Orr, 2006). Other research has highlighted effective and innovative principal preparation programs (Boyland, Lehman, and Sriver, 2015; Isik, 2003; Orpanas & Orr, 2014). This ongoing phenomenon strengthens the needs for continuous research on university principal preparation programs.

Leadership is internationally known as an element that makes a difference in schools. Research on successful schools across the globe tends to focus on school leadership (Batt, 2017). Notwithstanding different perspectives of educational leadership preparation and practice, school leadership is considered to be an important factor in school success (Barber, Whelan, & Clark, 2010; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004; Orphanos & Orr, 2014; Pina, Cabrel, & Alves, 2015). Research on principal preparation is significant due to the impact on teaching and student learning (Corcoran, 2017). Researchers sought to contribute the knowledge base on leadership preparation and program redesign through this research.

Further, because adult learners are the population for this graduate program, adult learning tenets were considered and incorporated into the redesigned program. Authentic learning principles align with adult learning principles. Adults learn best through knowledge and activities that are real-world and relevant (Knowles, 1990).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Relevant literature pertaining to some of the themes were highlighted in the review of literature, however, most of the relevant literature is embedded throughout the research.

Realistic Preparation

Many university principal programs have been criticized for being too theoretical and not practical enough to successfully prepare leadership candidates (Hess & Kelly, 2007; Levine, 2005). Graduates from university principal preparation programs must be prepared to operate in the real world and are expected to have realistic skill sets (Orr, Pecheone, Snyder, Murphy, Palanski, Beaudin, & Buttram, 2018). Principals must possess a mix of theoretical knowledge and practical skills; therefore, university preparation programs should offer curriculums in accordance with this aim (Hallinger & Bridges, 2017). Curriculums that offer these characteristics are deliberately designed and based on authentic learning (Shaked & Schechter, 2017).

Realistic principal preparation can be established through authentic learning experiences. Authentic learning “is a measure of a curriculum’s relevance and appropriateness to the world that graduating students will enter” (McKenzie, Morgan, Cochrane, Watson & Roberts, 2002, p.246). Johansson (1991) posited that authentic activities have real-world relevance, are practical, integrative, and rigorous. Authentic activities require work and thinking at the highest levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy. Authentic learning can be included in curriculum design through authentic activities. Instructional strategies such as problem-based learning, case studies, project-based learning, and cognitive apprenticeships comprise the anchored instruction that enables authentic activities, therefore, allowing lessons to have real-world relevance. These authentic activities lead to skills building and stickiness. Stickiness refers to the structure and manner of delivery that makes the learning resonant and memorable (Gladwell, 2002).

Practical Skills

Developing practical leadership skills is consistent with the idea of realistic principal preparation. Principals need to be prepared for the type of skills they will immediately use when they assume the role (Bowers, 2017). When leadership program graduates enter the workforce and report that their university preparation program was too theoretical and did not prepare them for the real world, they are expressing the fact that they did not acquire the practical skills that allow them to function in the field as do professionals (Lombardi, 2007). The roles and responsibilities of principals vary and as a result principal candidate must be able to transfer learned skills. Learning transfer is “the application of new learning to other situations” (Smith & Ragan, 2005, p. 347). This concept also suggests the principals must be able to think critically and contextual the skills learned in their preparation programs (Meemar, 2018).

METHODOLOGY

At the outset of this project, we developed one open-ended research question for researchers and practitioners to solicit their perception of educational leadership program redesign:

What areas do you believe are important to educational leadership program redesign and would improve principal preparation?

This research question served as our mechanism for uncovering and exploring variations in the perspective of faculty members and principals in relation to redesign efforts. Researchers asked one primary research question, but the question inherently demanded multiple responses from participants. Participant perspectives were based on their professional knowledge, leadership preparation, perceived local needs, and existing literature in the field.

Participants

We interviewed a criterion purposive sample of eight participants (four principals and four university faculty members) using the interview questions. Each principal had at least five years, but not more than eight years of experience. In addition, each one of them graduated from the educational leadership department being redesigned. Four faculty members were from two local universities, two from each university, participated in the study. Each faculty participant was tenured and had between 5 and 8 years of experience. Both sets of participants had extensive knowledge of state certification requirements and experience collaborating with educational stakeholders within the state.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data from the recorded semi-structured participant interviews were analyzed by researcher practitioners. Interviews ranged from 15-25 minutes and all participants were asked the identical questions, but were allowed to elaborate as they deemed appropriate. Initial questions were asked to obtain participant demographic information. Some of these questions were very rudimentary such as what is your name, age, ethnicity, and current position. Other questions during this phase required a more detailed response. These included:

- 1) How many years have you been in education and in what roles?
- 2) What is your educational and leadership philosophy?
- 3) Describe your formal and informal leadership preparation.

Participants were asked to reflect upon their professional experiences, leadership preparation, local needs of school leaders in the region, and the empirical research they use to inform their professional practices. After allowing participants a few minutes to reflect, researcher practitioners asked the participants to consider their reflections and elaborate on the prompt:

Elaborate on the areas you think are most important to redesigning the educational leadership program and would improve principal preparation.

Transcription was obtained through an online commercial company. Participant responses were double coded for emerging themes using Nvivo. Initial coding was completed line by line and incident by incident. Related initial codes were then grouped into themes by participant group (i.e. faculty & principals).

RESULTS

The Faculty Member's Perspective

The redesign of the university's Educational Leadership program was precipitated state requirements and faculty desire to redesign the program in an effective manner. The mandated changes were intended to usher in a new era of leader preparation education, not for universities to simply rebrand or repackage what they had always done. Entering the redesign, university faculty members embraced the change and focused on missing elements of program and recommendations

from the literature on principal preparation. Further, faculty members wanted to maintain their imprint on program graduates; reconfigure the curriculum to best educate and train prospective school leaders to meet the needs of local schools; and at the same time abide by accreditation requirements. Faculty members also thought that it was important for the redesigned program to be distinctive in order to be competitive with other university programs and alternative preparation programs in the region. Individual faculty members shared many perspectives about the program redesign from their practical public school background, but four themes emerged from their responses.

Authentic learning

Faculty members strongly expressed their desire to ensure that the program redesign be replete with opportunities for authentic learning. These desires were expressed through various phrases such as, “students need to experience what principals do on a daily basis through their preparation”; “we have to ensure that our programs are designed in such a way that learner learn in realistic ways”; if we cannot prepare our students for the realistic expectations, we are not effective”; and our goal is to prepare aspiring leaders in relevant and meaningful ways”. These phrases and other key word were revealed throughout the transcriptions. In addition, several key words such as “authentic”, “real-world”, “comparable experiences”, and “contextualized learning” were identified throughout the transcription.

Skills building

Every faculty member spoke of the need to ensure that program redesign included a degree of skill building. Faculty members stated that the redesign must be aligned in such a way that students obtain the skills necessary to be successful as principals. Faculty spoke of the need for students to have a 21st century skill set marked by instructional leadership, operational leadership, budgeting, law, physical and online safety, human resources, and be able perform, delegate, and oversee all these skills.

Practical application courses

Faculty members were asked about their perspectives on practical application courses. That is course that allow student to enroll in hours working on related content at a school while being enrolled in the accompanying integrated course. There are no textbooks for practical application (PA) courses as various content from the text(s) used in the accompanying integrated course are used if needed. Faculty participants asserted that theory that is unrelated to practice is a “wasted opportunity for sticky learning”. Faculty members suggested that “practical applications courses” were needed and state that these courses provide the perfect vehicle for blending theory with practice in the new curriculum. The skills development dimension of the curriculum made the theory actionable.

Faculty members believed PA courses served as mini-internships during the program because they enabled real-world activities that were job and district embedded (JADE). JADE became the acronym that the lead university faculty member used as the touchstone for learning activities in the redesigned program. JADE experiences align with the tenets of active and authentic learning that undergirded the new design. All data sets used, and issues studied in the PA courses were real-world with several school district personnel providing access to JADE opportunities. The personal involvement of school district personnel ensures that site-based learning experiences start with the first semester and continue throughout the educational leadership program.

As one participant stated, that, at face value, enrollment in PA courses is a skills building undertaking. However, in the larger context, these courses provide practice with and exposure to

leadership *thinking*, which is vital to functioning as a competent and confident professional. An emphasis on practical application alone, without attention to leadership thinking, could entrench the developing leader in current practice. This is not the aim. The aim is for the students to function as problem solvers who are forward thinking and can recognize and take advantage of opportunities for change and innovation. Leaders engage in this type of integrative thinking on a daily basis. Practicing “leadership thinking” is important education, and an important component of skills building in the redesigned preparation program.

Partnership with school districts

One tenet of the state approval guidelines required universities to collaborate with a school district when offering an educational leadership program. Requiring the collaboration was another attempt to close the theory- practice gap that exists in many educational leadership programs. Faculty believed that PA courses in the university’s program serve as an ideal mechanism for substantive collaboration because the courses are flexible and customizable. An aspect of collaborative work with the school district occurred when district personnel identified topics of interest for course activities and selected pertinent data sets for program use.

Additionally, faculty members believed that collaboration was enabled when the PA courses were taught by in-service practitioners, qualified to teach at the university level as adjuncts and familiar with leading successfully in schools. The practitioners added value to the learning experience by bringing direct, current, in-field knowledge to the graduate classroom. Clinical faculty model is essential for the new program design, as current knowledge, in this age of accountability, is critical to the success of the PA courses.

Principal Perspectives

Meaningful learning

Very similar to authentic learning as identified by faculty, principals tended to focus on meaningful learning experiences as being important in university leadership redesign. Principal participants were asked to identify areas that are important to educational leadership program redesign. Principal responses seemed to focus on alignment to realistic job expectations. One principal stated that, “leadership preparation curriculum should be a strategic arrangement of the curriculum to meet the pragmatic needs of students who will be school leaders”. The participant further stated that some principal preparation programs do not meet the needs of their students simply because they do not understand what the needed skills and abilities are to successfully do the job from a practitioner’s standpoint. Common terminology used included “it’s important that the redesign eliminate busy work and focus on realistic work. Principal participants’ responses revealed meaningful learning is need, but they do not think universities can adequately prepare school leaders because the students they serve work in multiple school districts and settings, which all demand different skills sets. One participant stated that, “there is no way for a beginning preparation program to prepare you for all you have to deal with, it’s impossible”. This belief was further revealed when another principal stated, “I have learned way more as a principal than I learned at my university”. Another respondent stated that, “the task for university principal preparation programs is to figure out how to design programs that prepare students to be effective in a lot of areas and that is going to be difficult”. One participant stated: “I believe that I was unacceptably ill prepared for the role of principal by my university, specifically in the following areas dealing with difficult parents, conflict management, entrepreneurial skills, and multitasking with large volumes of information daily. In these key areas,

I had to depend on job-embedded training, my personal judgment, advice from fellow principals and organizational traditions.”

Lack of principal input

Every principal participant essentially complained that principal input is not included in university curriculum planning enough to be relevant. Principal used phrases such as, “principals have no voice in what being taught”; legislators do not have a clue of what we experience on a daily basis and that leads to faulty principal preparation standards”; most professors in my university leadership program never were principals or had conversations with principals”; decisions about principal preparation are being made too far those who are actually do the job. This theme very clearly emerged from transcriptions from principal participants.

No silver bullets

Principals do not believe that there is a panacea to creating effective principal preparation programs. They perceive that program redesign maybe helpful and has a “value-added component” to principal preparation but preparation courses and quasi-experimental settings cannot replace the learning that only comes from doing the actual job and interacting with the school environment. One principal noted, “Aspiring leaders and university professors should not assume that success in coursework and internships will equate to success as a principal.” The participant continues by stating that the dynamics of the role of principal are far too numerous to substantiate such a grandiose assumption and will lead to disappointment.

DISCUSSION

Several of the themes that emerged from this research were aligned by participant groups (faculty & principals) and consistent with existing empirical research on leadership preparation. University faculty suggested that authentic learning and skills building are important to program redesign and improving principal preparation. These concepts are closely related to the meaningful learning theme that emerged from principals. The explicit underpinning of these concepts is that principals need to be prepared in ways that offer relevant experiences commensurate to their roles as principals (Geer, Anast-May, & Gurley, 2014; Glathorn, Jailall, & Jailall, 2016; Haller, Hunt, Pacha, & Fazekas, 2016; Kearney & Valadez, 2015).

Faculty members recommended practical application course content that blends theory and practice. Empirical data strongly support this concept from multiple from perspectives (Deschaine & Jankens, 2017; Halinger & Bridges, 2017; Kearney & Valadez, 2015; Levine, 2005). Support for this concept is revealed in critical seminal research (Hess & Kelly, 2007) and in more novel research on the concept (Ni, Hollingworth, & Rorrer, 2017).

The results of this research reveal faculty and principal perspectives aligned on the concept of school and university partnerships. Faculty members specifically recommended leveraging school and university partnerships as a tool to improve tool. Principals stated that there should be more input from current principals into university principal preparation curriculum (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016). These parallel perspectives strongly indicate a need for school district and university partnerships and collaboration and is heavily supported in research (Browne-Ferrigno, 2011; Cosner, Tozer, Zavitkovsky, & Whalen, 2015; Herman et al., 2017; Orphanos & Orr, 2014; Orr, 2006).

Principals believe that there is no silver bullet for educational leadership redesign components or implementing improvement to principal preparation. This term has been used ad nauseam

in education. It makes sense from a practical standpoint. In addition to the pragmatism of this concept, it is supported by researchers and practitioners in the field of principal preparation and development (Bell & Taylor, 2015; Reed & Swaminathan, 2016; Russell & Sabina, 2014; Tandberg, Hillman, & Barakat, 2014).

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PLANNING/REDESIGN

Reflecting upon data collected and analyzed during this study and research on best practices in leadership development, we made several recommendations for university faculty who are planning leadership program redesign. These recommendations represent a collective reflection of faculty and principal perspectives.

Recommendation #1

University Educational Leadership faculty should implement some form of authentic learning to bridge the theory to-practice gap in traditional courses. This authentic learning should be informed by local needs and context. The content should allow students an opportunity to encounter in the real world school leadership experiences in the context as they occur on a daily basis. Authentic learning experiences will provide opportunities for the educational leadership students to be exposed to the types of leadership activities that school leaders engage in daily. This level of exposure can lead to meaningful skills building

Recommendation #2

Collaboration among stakeholders is crucial to optimizing preparation of leader candidates. School district administrators should embrace the concepts of aligning program objectives to the needs of local school districts and globally accepted leadership development standards and practices. This may be accomplished through detailed analysis and standard crosswalks. Additionally, university faculty should engage school district leaders in collaborative research topics to align curriculum. University curriculum should be based on the realities of school leadership and based on local district needs, while being transferable to different educational settings.

Recommendation #3

Educational Leadership faculty should evaluate programs as appropriate to that students are adequately prepared with common leadership skills such as team building, networking, maximizing school resources, interpersonal skills, budgets, data analytics, critical conversations, motivating and leading groups and teams, and active coaching/mentoring. More importantly, preparing students to think critically and be able to analyze and synthesize large amounts of skill sets and information to identify and take leadership of the correct elements for school success.

Recommendation #4

When applicable, university faculty should explore opportunities for symbiotic relationships with school districts by allowing district professionals to participate in leadership preparation. This relationship may be realized by school-based professionals serving in various roles in leadership preparation programs. These roles may include guest lecturer/speaker, panelist for leadership summits and seminars, subject and content reviewers, and other areas deemed appropriate by both entities. The important factor is that the relationship be mutually beneficial to university faculty and school-district professionals. Faculty research and curriculum should be informed by realistic practices and professional experience. Accordingly, school-based practices should be informed by empirical research conducted by faculty. Another component of this recommendation involves hiring adjuncts and clinical faculty members who are currently employed by local school districts. This

recommendation is appropriate when school district professionals possess adequate state and university credentials to teach in leadership preparation programs. In addition, to maximize effectiveness of this practice, we recommend explicit calibration of content and andragogy among university faculty and school professionals who serve in these roles. These relationships are demonstrative of effective school district and university collaboration, which we believe is essential to university-based leadership preparation.

Recommendation #5

A valuable addition to the process of educational leadership program evaluation should include input from local practitioners. This input is valuable because it helps university curriculum remain relevant and help university faculty identify programmatic gaps and provided a pathway for meaningful improvements.

FURTHER RESEARCH

On-going exploration into different planning aspects of educational leadership program curricula must be paramount to university faculty. The present undertaking addressed macro-level aspects of a redesigned program (design, delivery, and faculty). Further exploration that centers on the examination of micro-level aspects of programs (specific content of courses, formative and summative assessments, and effective use of instructional strategies) is also worthwhile and will inform the continuous improvement process of educational leadership programs in a tangible and actionable way.

CONCLUSION

When redesigning leadership programs and/or planning educational changes that impact principal preparation, it is important for university faculty members to gather the perspective of local practitioners. Practitioners are uniquely poised to provide perspectives that are current, relevant, and informed by real-world practice; their perspectives are vital to program improvement efforts. Further, authentic learning is the ideal vehicle to bridge the theory to practice gap that exists in principal preparation programs.

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