

Principal Candidates' Reflective Learning During a Full-Time Internship

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Abstract

In this case study, we explore how principal candidates made sense of their internship by analyzing their weekly reflections during a school year. We found that candidates' views of leadership developed from viewing leadership solely through the lens of making decisions and providing direction, to recognizing that much of the work of a school leader came from building relationships and delegating leadership responsibilities. Candidates' experiences managing student discipline, conducting classroom walkthroughs and teacher evaluations, and leading professional development and professional learning communities (PLCs) were especially developmental. We conclude with implications for preservice training programs and future research.

Keywords

internships, principal preparation, self-reflection, university programs, leadership program design

Introduction

The internship is widely considered to be the most important component of principal preparation (Anderson & Reynolds, 2015; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Orr & Orphanos, 2011). Researchers have found that internships helped principal candidates connect theory to practice (Pounder & Crow, 2005; Salazar et al., 2013), develop their skills by engaging in the real work of schools (Militello et al., 2009; Murphy, 1992), encounter a range of school problems and student poverty (Orr & Orphanos, 2011),

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and learn from principal mentors (Clayton & Myran, 2013; Clayton et al., 2013) and coaches (Barnett & O'Mahony, 2012; Rhodes & Fletcher, 2013). Importantly, principals considered the internship to be the most important experience in their pre-service development (Chandler et al., 2013; Gordon & Moles, 1994), and internship quality has been found to be positively associated with career intentions of becoming a principal (Orr & Orphanos, 2011).

Nonetheless, despite a large and growing number of studies that highlight the value of the internship, few examine how interns make sense of and reflect upon their internship experience while it is happening. That is, most studies feature surveys or interviews of principal candidates near or after graduation (e.g., Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Orr & Orphanos, 2011). A notable exception is work by Perez et al. (2011) who conducted interviews with principal candidates throughout the course of an 18-month field experience to examine how candidates' beliefs about school leadership changed. They found that seven of the eight candidates experienced marked changes in their views on school leadership (Perez et al., 2011).

Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to build upon this work by exploring how principal candidates make sense of their internship as it unfolds. We specifically focus on identifying how internships shaped principal candidates' views on leadership and the key leadership experiences they identified as most developmental to their growth. To do so, we conducted a case study utilizing document analysis (Yin, 2015) to analyze weekly reflection logs of 26 principal candidates enrolled in a single university principal preparation program during the 2019–2020 school year. We ask:

1. *How are principal candidates' views of school leadership shaped by their internship?*
2. *What leadership experiences do principal candidates identify as most developmental during their internship?*

Literature Review

Internships are considered to be both the most important and most challenging feature for principal preparation programs to deliver (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Orr, 2011; Orr & Orphanos, 2011). Researchers have identified a number of important characteristics of high-quality internships. First, they are tightly aligned to and integrated with coursework (Barakat et al., 2019; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). Second, they include support from an expert mentor and coaches (Clayton et al., 2013; Cordeiro & Smith-Sloan, 1995). Third, they provide interns with the necessary time to engage in hands-on leadership opportunities that represent the real-work of school principals (Campbell & Parker, 2016; Clayton & Thessin, 2017). Fourth, they expose interns to a variety of contexts and diverse student populations (Hackmann et al., 1999). Finally, they include strong district partners who work alongside preparation programs to design and implement structured internships (Fry-Ahearn & Collins, 2016).

While it is clear that internships vary widely across state and program contexts (Anderson & Reynolds, 2015; Campbell & Parker, 2016), it seems that candidates

generally find the internship to be the most important part of their training and development (Chandler et al., 2013; Jiang et al., 2009). In particular, candidates who engaged in full- or part-time residency programs reported being more satisfied with their programs and more knowledgeable in their field compared to candidates from more traditional programs that only completed fieldwork activities (Hafner et al., 2012). This finding may be partially attributable to the way in which a full- or part-time internship allowed candidates the opportunity to become socialized into a new leadership community of practice, experiencing the same discomfort, urgency, and responsibility that principals experience (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Perez et al., 2011). Certainly, all field experiences draw upon a model of action learning (Skipton Leonard & Lang, 2010), where candidates engage in the work in a real-world setting with opportunities to reflect upon their leadership practices in communities of practice or in the presence of mentors and coaches (Ashford & DeRue, 2012; Thomas et al., 2012). Yet there seems to be something unique about the opportunity to experience the work of an administrator within the context of a full-time internship, not least of which is the opportunity to engage in a similar set of activities as principals, often with a relatively high degree of autonomy and authority (Drake, 2020).

Importantly, while interns have opportunities to experience the work of the principal during full-time internships, we know less about how interns make sense of their internship *as it unfolds*. Perez et al. (2011) followed the experiences of eight aspiring principals as they engaged in an 18-month field experience designed to address an achievement problem of a target student population at their schools. While candidates continued to work in their respective roles at their school, they were required to lead an advisory committee to enact a plan of action designed to support a target student population. Through these leadership experiences, candidates' views of leadership changed in a number of ways. Specifically, they found that their conception of leadership developed from traditional notions of management (i.e., principals "in charge" or "running the school") to a view of leadership that was much more complex and demanding, requiring collaboration and shared decision making. Nearly all the participants agreed that leadership required building relationships of trust and empowering others to make decisions.

Nonetheless, their study was limited to candidates' reflections during three standardized, open-ended interviews at the beginning, middle, and end of the 18-month time period (Perez et al., 2011). In this study, we build upon this work by examining the experiences of full-time principal interns through the analysis of their weekly reflections during an academic school year. These reflections have the benefit of providing a window into candidates' thinking at weekly intervals throughout their internship.

Reflective Practice

Reflective practice has long been considered a crucial component of both teacher and leader preparation (e.g., Sergiovanni, 1987). Yet, reflection as a practice in educator preparation has been criticized for lacking a uniform definition (Copeland et al., 1993).

For example, Fox et al. (2011) argued that “pre-service teachers are frequently required to observe and conduct lessons in schools and then ‘reflect’ on those experiences. However, these assignments may be given without a clearly articulated definition and rationale for reflective practice” (p. 37). Therefore, if the full benefits of reflection are to be realized, it must be defined and clearly articulated with a solid understanding of ideological and epistemological lineage (Collin et al., 2013; Jay & Johnson, 2002).

Dewey (1933) was first to describe reflection as a rational and intentional process. Dewey believed that reflection allowed learners to critically examine their experiences to better understand their beliefs and reactions as a means for personal learning (Dewey, 1933). Schön (1987) revised Dewey’s ideas by arguing that reflection allowed learners to consciously bring to light their implicit knowledge. That is, professionals could examine their tacit knowledge, either retrospectively or in-the-moment, to improve their future practices (Schön, 1987).

In another stream of work, Kolb and Fry (1975) created a learning cycle framework that broke down the elements of reflection. In this cycle, concrete experience is followed by reflective observation, which leads to abstract conceptualization, and finally, active experimentation. Pedler et al. (2010) articulated this model as: “something happened, what happened, so what, and, now what?” (p. 51). Kolb and Fry (1975) believed each element of the learning cycle must be kept in balance, even if an individual prefers one of the elements, reinforcing the idea of reflection as a deliberate and well-considered process.

To Boud et al. (2013), these ideas about reflection were too theoretical and did not take into account the role of emotions in reflection. Strong emotion influences the recall and interpretation of experiences, and, therefore, must be considered in the reflection process (Boud et al., 2013). They also saw reflection as a process that could be facilitated and, in fact, benefited from teacher and learner interaction in the process (Boud et al., 2013). This type of reflection could take place through conversation or by keeping a journal or portfolio.

Journal writing allows the learner to work through the learning cycle model regarding an experience, while giving allowance for expression of emotion. Journals not only help learners reflect upon their experiences in order to improve future experiences, but they also document this development so that the learner can see the growth that has taken place (Diamond, 1991; Holly, 1984). Shared journaling practices between teachers and learners has since become a common practice, wherein learners reflect upon their learning experiences while receiving feedback and encouragement from their instructors. Studies show that shared journaling can encourage connection and facilitate learning between both the learner and instructor (Anderson & Shannon, 1988; Grennan, 1988).

Journaling has been found to be a particularly effective tool in professional education (McGuire & Rhodes, 2009). For example, many school leadership programs require journal reflections or logs to help track student growth on leadership standards and competencies (Gray & Bishop, 2009), especially during the internship (Campbell & Parker, 2016; Cordeiro & Smith-Sloan, 1995). These opportunities to reflect on their experiences during the internship is a key feature of innovative preparation

programs (Cheney et al., 2010; Fry-Ahearn & Collins, 2016) and seems to be a particularly valuable learning opportunity for graduates (Perez et al., 2011).

Methods

This study uses the qualitative method of case study (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to examine (a) how full-time internships shaped principal candidates' views on leadership and (b) the key leadership experiences they identified as most developmental to their growth. More specifically, we use document analysis to analyze weekly reflection logs of 26 principal candidates enrolled in a single university principal preparation program during the 2019–2020 school year. The use of case study allows us to understand the experience of the full-time internship through the lens of multiple participants within one particular case (Yin, 2015).

We include our reflexivity to be transparent regarding the influence of the researchers' bias to the interpretations of the analyses (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Preissle et al., 2015). The lead author of the study is an assistant professor who serves as an instructor in a principal preparation program. The second author is a PhD student and research assistant whose research interests include education leadership, policy and early childhood development. The third author graduated from a principal preparation program and works as an assistant professor in educational leadership. Six additional graduate students enrolled in a masters of school administration program assisted with the initial round of coding and interpreting the preliminary results. All of us are likely influenced in our interpretations based on our own experiences working with and participating in a principal preparation program.

Data and Sample

Data for this study were gathered from a sample of 26 principal candidates completing a full-time internship program (over 750 clinical hours) during the 2019–2020 school year.

The organization of the internship program grouped candidates into three separate cohorts based upon the school district in which they were employed. Each cohort had a university-based cohort director, who was responsible for overall coordination, administration, and supervision of the cohort as a whole, as well as provided individual support to candidates within the cohort. Within each district, candidates were assigned to elementary, middle, and high schools. The principal of each school served as the candidate's principal mentor. Additionally, each candidate received support from an executive coach, who were former administrators who provided ongoing guidance to candidates throughout the internship. Across our study sample, candidates served in schools with, at times, strikingly different contexts, which ranged from rural, suburban, and urban settings with varying socioeconomic and racially diverse demographics. In Table 1 we provide both the personal background and school context of each candidate.

Table 1. Principal Candidate Characteristics.

| Name | Gender | Race/ethnicity | School level | Years of teaching experience |
|-----------|--------|----------------|--------------|------------------------------|
| Morgan | F | White | Elementary | 12 |
| Natalie | F | White | Middle | 8 |
| Luis | M | Asian | Elementary | 10 |
| April | F | White | Elementary | 18 |
| Vance | M | Black | High | 6 |
| Megan | F | White | Middle | 14 |
| Kendra | F | White | Elementary | 8 |
| Xavier | M | Asian | 6–12 | 4 |
| Ashley | F | White | High | 11 |
| Ryan | M | Black | High | 17 |
| Meredith | F | White | High | 11 |
| James | M | White | Elementary | 5 |
| Caroline | F | Black | Elementary | 13 |
| Maya | F | Black | Elementary | 5 |
| Christine | F | White | Elementary | 20 |
| Erin | F | White | K-12 | 7 |
| Olivia | F | White | Elementary | 10 |
| Gabe | M | White | High | 14 |
| Gloria | F | Black | Middle | 23 |
| Rebecca | F | White | Elementary | 6 |
| Kelly | F | White | Elementary | 10 |
| Alexis | F | White | Elementary | 28 |
| Chloe | F | White | K-12 | 5 |
| Chantelle | F | Black | High | 5 |
| Brooke | F | White | Elementary | 5 |
| John | M | White | Middle | 6 |

Note: All names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

In order to examine candidates' experiences, we used end-of-week reflections, which asked candidates to reflect upon their learning during the week and describe any "lessons learned" (Bowen, 2009; Love, 2003). Candidates submitted reflections from August 2019 until school closure in March 2020 due to COVID-19, with some choosing to respond in April and May. The range in candidate weekly reflections was 18 to 37 (median = 29.5). The total number of reflections was 766, and the length of response varied widely, from 300 to 1,100 words. Participants were informed prior to the start of their internship about the ways that the data would be collected and analyzed for research purposes (Preissle et al., 2015). The candidates typed their reflections whenever they chose throughout the course of the week prior to submission on Sunday evenings (Love, 2003). The reflections were intended to be reviewed by each

candidates' cohort director and executive coach to receive feedback and next steps for enhancing their internship experience (Bowen, 2009; Love, 2003).

Analysis

Principal candidates' weekly reflective journal entries are considered personal documents which describe their experiences and learning throughout the internship (Love, 2003). We utilized document analysis of the candidates' reflective journals to understand the beliefs and experiences of each candidate (Love, 2003). The research team utilized the qualitative software Dedoose to inductively code the students' reflections, specifically looking for information indicating what principal candidates considered the most developmental aspects of the internship (Saldana, 2011). The research team met weekly over the course of the study during the data analysis and writing process to ensure that interpretations of the data were agreed upon and to determine if any additional sources of data were needed (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Love, 2003). Throughout the analysis process, the team utilized memoing in an effort to reduce bias and as means of an audit trail (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

The coding cycle began with the full team using descriptive coding, making note of key topics and ideas found in the candidates' reflections (Saldana, 2011). Initially, the team coded the same transcript to ensure agreement and reliability of their coding patterns (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2014). Teams then worked in pairs to code transcripts, using thematic analysis and memoing to develop an understanding of the themes across time and candidate (Bowen, 2009). Upon completion of all 766 reflections, the team worked together to determine emergent themes that were evident from the initial 160 codes. These emergent themes were then categorized in the final round of coding into the main themes outlined in the findings section (Love, 2003; Miles et al., 2014). For example, codes such as "meeting with parents," "shadowing students," and "interactions with assistant principal," were eventually categorized into the theme of Building Relationships, with "shadowing students" also included with the theme of Developmental Experiences.

Limitations

There are a few important limitations to this study. First, candidates varied in their ability to reflect upon their weekly experiences. This variation took multiple forms, including the length of their reflection, the number of reflections they submitted, and the depth of their reflection. As some candidates were more reflective, responsive, and thoughtful, we tried to ensure that their voices were not overly represented in the themes and findings by looking for themes that were present regardless of candidates' ability to reflect deeply or thoroughly. Of course, while we made an effort to ensure that quotes and findings were representative of a majority of the candidates, each candidate did not necessarily experience each reported reflective learning theme. Second, by only analyzing weekly reflections, we were not able to ask follow-up or clarifying questions of the principal candidates (Love, 2003). That is, while the reflective

journals provided rich descriptions of candidates' experiences, in some instances it would have been helpful to ask the participants additional questions to clarify or confirm emergent themes. Finally, candidates' journal entries are subject to intentional or unintentional misrepresentation of the events that occurred, either as a form of protecting the actions of the participants and/or because the candidates did not understand all the elements that contributed to an incident or experience (Love, 2003).

Findings

Principal Candidates' Expanding Views of School Leadership

Like Perez et al. (2011), we found that the internship provided candidates with rich experiences that developed their conception of leadership, from viewing leadership solely through the lens of making decisions and providing direction, to recognizing that much of the work of a school leader came from building relationships with students, parents, caregivers, teachers, staff, and the community. Candidates further developed their conception of distributed leadership by first observing, then engaging in practices that empowered teachers and staff to immerse themselves in the work.

Building relationships. Candidates' reflections often centered on the importance of building relationships with students, parents, caregivers, teachers, staff, and the community. Although their positions included leadership responsibilities for the entire school, it was the day-to-day interactions with individual students, teachers, or caregivers that had the most meaningful impact. For example, in the fourth week of his internship, Xavier states, "As administrators, we often are trained to see the school from a big picture lens. However, sometimes it was the small connections which made the biggest difference in the life of a child." Alexis tells a story about an elementary school student who asked if she would come to see him at a family event taking place at the school. "I did make it to his class," she recounted, "then I realized no one was there for him. When he saw me, he burst through all the other parents and kids to get to me. . . . It was then that I realized the importance of this job." Another candidate, Gabe, described helping a freshman who was failing all of his classes come up with an improvement plan. Later that day, he recalled seeing that student who ran up to him, "excited to share that he had turned in a missing assignment and was now passing that class. He said he was excited to focus on his missing math work next!"

Along with students, candidates recognized the importance of building relationships with parents and caregivers. In particular, candidates learned about the importance of developing relationships with caregivers *before* problems arise. For instance, a few months into the semester, a student was caught selling drugs on campus. John reflected, "I called the parents. . . because I have already built a good relationship with them. These phone calls went very well. . . . My first lesson learned, relationships are everything in both good and bad times." Another candidate, Morgan, learned the value of taking time to get to know parents. In a phone conversation with a parent about her son's discipline for the second time in a week, she recounted:

I noticed the sound of defeat in her voice. By the end of our conversation, she said to me ‘Do what you want. We are going to have to move anyway. You might as well start the transfer paperwork.’ Her voice was a bit shaky, and I asked her what was going on . . . She realized that she won’t be able to make her bills. Her job shortened her hours down to 10 a week, she had been trying to find another job with no luck, she wasn’t able to make her light bill last month, and her rent is due soon. She had moved here from [another state], alone, to give the best to her sons and nothing was working out.

Morgan then reached out to the school guidance counselor who was able to provide immediate assistance through local organizations. This powerful experience provided her with an opportunity to reflect on the important connection between students’ behavior at school and their home environment. In this same vein, Natalie recognized early in her internship that “the population of these students is so different from where I grew up and what I am used to just a few minutes down the street,” noting that, “Some of my students this week were committed to a psychiatric hospital themselves or had a parent in jail. It is hard to try to change a child’s mentality when this is the home environment that they are used to.” Natalie, along with other candidates, made efforts to build relationships to understand how to better provide support.

In addition to students and caregivers, candidates recognized the importance of connecting with teachers and staff. Luis noticed how his elementary school principal mentor made a point of visiting every classroom to say hello before the students arrived, a practice that he believed “showed the teachers and staff that the administrators are present and ready to help.” Another candidate, Olivia, discovered the importance of her administrative staff and counselors when she was the only administrator in the building. She reflected, “The data manager and receptionist were incredible resources and supports with the myriad of issues that arose and the school counselors provided needed emotional supports.” Candidates also took time to meet with the lunchroom and custodial staff. For example, Maya spent time with the custodians, “learning their routine at that time, cleaning bathrooms, and learning about some of their needs.” She then wrote: “I learned how much people take pride in their work, and how much our custodians may feel invisible. I do talk with our custodians every day I see them, but I want to extend my appreciation further.”

Finally, candidates recognized the importance of developing community relationships. In one particularly impactful experience, Natalie described a planned visit to two trailer park communities to meet families, distribute backpacks filled with food, and play games. She noted,

All during the past year our courses say that home and community visits are essential for building positive relationships with stakeholders and parents or children living in poverty. It is vital and crucial that the administration team show up for something like this. Both the principal and assistant principal were absent for this event and only five staff members (out of about 80) showed up.

Natalie's experience helped her to recognize the importance of making strong connections with the community—something she heard in many of her classes, but now experienced in practice.

Distributed leadership. The candidates' ability to view leadership from a distributed perspective (Spillane et al., 2004) developed quickly as they saw how principals managed their enormous work load. In fact, many reflections from the first few weeks of the internship focused on the importance of learning how to delegate and trust others. In her second reflection in August, Gloria commented, "There are so many things that have to be done to ensure a school operates effectively every day. Realistically, a principal cannot do everything, so he must put a huge level of trust and confidence in the abilities of his administrative team and office staff." Vance highlighted the importance of delegation in his third week. He wrote,

Delegate the work. You can't be everywhere at the same time. You have to be able to manage your time and prioritize your to-do list. Dealing with buses, discipline, facilities, teacher support, student affairs, can become tasking. Use your receptionist, bookkeeper, counselors to help you manage affairs throughout your day.

Around the same time, Luis learned an important lesson from his principal: "I learned the importance of delegating a task and then letting it go! My principal pointed out that our AP sometimes gives people a task and then spends unnecessary energy micro-managing."

Importantly, candidates' reflections transitioned from making observations about the value of delegation in the early weeks of their internship, to delegating leadership responsibilities themselves as they took on additional roles. Erin, for example, was asked to lead a committee to determine which students did not have adequate access to the internet during COVID. In her reflection she discussed initially being concerned about handing off projects to others. What if they weren't ready? How much oversight would it require of her? The prospect felt overwhelming. However, through experience her understanding changed:

This week I got to practice a different kind of distributive leadership that seems way more feasible to me. Get teachers onto teams and have them be a part of the planning process and as a team decide next steps, or pieces of the work that needs to be done and have teachers volunteer to own various pieces. They will step up for the ones they're passionate about and bring back really impressive work. My job then is less about setting them off on their own without support, and much more about slowly releasing responsibility to them until they've built the skills to take on a project solo. I have a much clearer vision of this work now and it would take work off my plate in a way I couldn't see with how I was originally conceptualizing distributive leadership.

Experiences like these highlight the learning that occurs when candidates transition from observing leadership to engaging in leadership behaviors themselves.

Developmental Experiences

One of the most valuable aspects of a full-time internship is how it provided candidates with the opportunity to enact the role of school leader (Drake, 2020). In particular, while there were three common activities that candidates reflected on most throughout the year—managing student discipline; conducting informal walkthroughs and teacher evaluations; and leading PLCs or professional development for teachers—the most significant learning and growth took place when candidates were engaged in leading the work themselves.

Student discipline. Student discipline was the issue candidates reflected on most frequently. Their experiences with student discipline seemed to be developmental in multiple ways. First, disciplinary incidents provided candidates with opportunities to learn about school discipline policies and practices. Second, they provided candidates with the opportunity to implement training they received during their coursework pertaining to restorative discipline practices. And finally, disciplinary issues provided candidates with opportunities to navigate the tension between witnessing how administrators implemented school discipline policies and what candidates learned in their coursework to be best practice.

At the beginning of the school year, many candidates were anxious about managing student discipline. For example, after two months working in a middle school, John commented,

I am getting much better at dealing with behavior on an admin level. It was my biggest fear going into this and it is becoming something I am gaining confidence with. This was always one of my strengths as a teacher but I felt very unprepared as an admin. I am really starting to feel comfortable in my own skin.

After being unable to stop a fight in the cafeteria, Gabe told his principal that he “felt completely unprepared for how to deal with fights.” The principal responded that “she often felt the same way,” then discussed the event in detail with him. Opportunities to jointly reflect on disciplinary actions with their principals helped boost the candidates’ confidence regarding their decisions.

In addition, candidates learned how to apply the training received in their program on childhood development and restorative discipline. One candidate, Xavier, reflected that “the highlight of my week was being able to sit in on a mediation between two students who had a conflict during lunch. It was wonderful to see how restorative practices can be used to help students navigate the often complex high school landscape.” Other candidates directly engaged in restorative practices. Morgan described meeting with a student who tried to rip up his workbook. After letting him cool off, she reflected:

We discussed his frustration, his reaction, and I employed a restorative strategy called “Repair the Harm.” This is an opportunity for students to “right their wrong” and think of

the ways they can make it better. The theory is that by putting this back onto the child, their actions and consequences are something they have control over. He wanted to tape back his book, so I helped hold the pieces together. We then went to his trigger (writing a sentence) and tried it over. He rewrote the sentence, clearly, and I think he was actually really proud of it. We taped that into the book and I asked him if he was ready to return to his class. He was, and we went. I actually felt very positive about this interaction. He was expecting to get into trouble, or spoken to. . .and instead, we discussed his thinking, and he had to fix what he had done in a moment of frustration.

In her first “solo behavior challenge,” April learned about the balance between restorative practices and her school’s discipline policies. She wrote about being able to mediate a situation between a teacher and student using restorative practices. Despite resolving the problem, the student still had to be suspended as per the school policy. April reflected upon her conversation with the student:

What I learned in just a short period of time was the level of trauma the child has encountered in only ten years of her life, was more than I was prepared for. We had opportunities to have deep emotional connections and also discuss the need to look beyond her circumstances and remind her that those do not define her. This was very life-changing for me and reminded me why I am doing what I do.

Yet there were also times when candidates were unable to use restorative practices. During a rather “hectic week. . .during which several students received long term suspensions due to it being their third disruption infraction,” Vance wrote, “Some of the suspensions I agreed with, some I would have liked the opportunity to use more restorative practices. Mainly because I know that one student, in particular, acts out so that we can remove him from the school setting and unfortunately he got what he wanted.” Later that school year, Vance lamented that a student who received a long-term suspension the previous year for having drugs was immediately given another long-term suspension on his first day back when he admitted smoking marijuana that morning to “calm [his] anxiety.” Vance wrote: “The first discipline issue was last year, and this year we know what he does and before we acclimate him back into school we suspend him long term on the first day. I feel like we could have used our better judgment to help this student work toward better decisions.”

Importantly, as candidates gained more experience and the school year progressed, there were times when they found themselves as the only administrator in the building. More specifically, of the 26 candidates, 11 described situations where they were alone, and in almost every case they highlighted student discipline issues that arose. In one particularly notable event in late February, Olivia described the following:

I ended up being the only admin in the building on Thursday and Friday with the lead secretary and magnet coordinators also out of the building. Thursday was a record-breaking one, with several incidents occurring concurrently that required administrative attention. We had a student punch a teacher, a regular education 5th grader defecate twice in his pants, racial slurs between students, a kindergartener attack a peer, three classes without subs, and

special transportation running exceptionally late. These events necessitated several parent calls and three parent conferences, providing additional learning.

Olivia then reflected that these events taught her to “triangulate information from teachers, parents, and the student to uncover root causes of behaviors” and “install communication systems so that all involved can do the same when incidents are handled by different people.”

Walkthroughs and teacher evaluation. Twenty three of the 26 candidates reflected on conducting informal classroom walkthroughs as part of a daily or weekly schedule, a requirement of their program. Many shadowed administrators or instructional coaches, while a few described co-developing walkthrough protocols with other leadership team members. Megan reflected, “I realize how important these walkthroughs can be so if a parent has a question or concern, you have some idea of what is going on in the classrooms.” Beyond reporting the activity, some candidates provided a deeper reflection on the moments when they were able to help an individual student during a lesson or support a teacher who was struggling to teach a standard. Candidates also noted that as the year progressed and they were assigned more responsibility in the building, less time was available for informal walkthroughs.

Throughout the internship, candidates are also required by their program to shadow a student for an entire day a few times a year. Kendra describes one of her experiences this way:

The student I shadowed is smart, outgoing, and confident, but her whole demeanor changed when teachers asked her to get out her homework. It was obvious she had tried to complete her math packet and her reading log, but she struggled with her math and her mother had not signed her reading log. She explained that she had tried to ask for help, but her mother suffers from MS so she, the student, often takes care of her little siblings at night; . . . it is really up to her to do almost everything. This made me really sad!

She went on to ponder internal questions that arose after spending an entire day with a student regarding classroom changes that might need to be addressed, which likely would not have been evident had the candidate not shadowed a student:

Are we really going to let lack of homework help define how this student feels about school? Is there a way we can offer homework assistance during the school day so that students like this, who are smart and hardworking, do not have to dread turning in homework? The experience was enlightening; I certainly walked away with more questions than answers!

Another candidate, Meredith, reflected on how her shadowing experience reminded her of the complex lives students lead, and how this complexity shapes their engagement with academic content:

I was shadowing a black male in academic level classes and it was eye-opening to see how boring his day is. He told me he was leaving campus for lunch and ran out of third period before I could get to him. He ended up skipping fourth period. When I talked to him the next day, he said he had to go home to take a nap before going to work. This is a student that works two jobs and helps take care of his single mother who is blind. He is working hard to get his credits in so he can finish high school early and work full time. It was interesting being in his shoes for a day and realizing how his mind is on so many other things than academics.

In a later reflection, Meredith described a second shadowing experience where she learned about how little students move throughout the day, noting that her average step-count of 12,000 was only 2,200. Therefore, when candidates spent purposeful time looking at the instructional day through the lens of a student, they were better able to begin to consider the supports, improvements, and structures that could enhance the overall academic experience for students. Structured full-time residencies ensure that future leaders have the chance to slow down and consider what schooling ought to look like from the student perspective and intentionally reflect on strategic changes that could make worthwhile improvements for students.

Each candidate was also required to observe or conduct formal evaluations, some of which were completed alongside their principal mentor or assistant principal. These experiences provided opportunities to compare their own ratings to that of the other administrators and learn how to provide feedback to teachers for instructional improvements. Megan wrote about a helpful experience conducting an observation with the assistant principal:

Last week I was able to complete a couple of evaluations with the 8th-grade assistant principal. After we completed the observations, we sat down and went over the observation tool to compare where we marked the teacher according to the standards. This was extremely helpful. When I marked a teacher lower, the 8th-grade AP was able to explain why he marked the teacher higher and the justification he used. He shared with me a document that explains what to look for in the conference as evidence.

Experience with formal evaluations allowed candidates to experience different ways teachers receive feedback. Olivia reflected:

I had the benefit of supporting my principal mentor and assistant principal on five post-observation conferences on Monday of this week. Some lessons observed were brilliant and others were mediocre at best . . . The incredibly wide variety of openness to feedback within the instructional staff still surprised me. The two staff who presented exemplar lessons were the most reflective and open to feedback, as expected. The poorest staff member was also accepting of feedback, with the mediocre instructors being passively resistant to our suggestions. These middle performing staff also tended to offer more excuses and showed an openness only to improvements they suggested on their own.

Importantly, observing and participating in formal evaluations afforded candidates the chance to provide feedback for instructional improvement. These experiences

seemed to be especially valuable when teachers disagreed with candidates' ratings. Ashley wrote, "I did have to have a crucial conversation with a staff member not agreeing with my rating of developing in one element under standard IV. After speaking with [my principal] mentor, he agrees with my rating and feels that I handled it appropriately." Positive affirmations from their principal mentors following a formal evaluation helped provide candidates with confidence that they were on the right track. Meredith's principal mentor praised her for the feedback she provided, saying "Wow! This is what the ratings are supposed to look like. They are supposed to provide teachers with solid feedback as opposed to the two sentences I tend to write."

When schools become naturally busy, targeted assignments that correspond to the instructional component of educational leadership, such as the requirement of walk-throughs, shadowing students, and formal observations, helped to ensure that candidates continued developing as instructional leaders. As evidenced by the various candidates' reflections, completing walkthroughs and formal observations with their principal mentor was an important learning experience for them. More specifically, the act of calibrating evaluation ratings and observing pre- and post-conferences were instrumental in candidates' development. These reflections suggest that throughout the course of the residency year, candidates transitioned from focusing on completing the evaluation process as a program requirement to leveraging the observation cycle as a way to improve the educational experience for students.

Leading PLCs and professional development for teachers. Though many candidates had experiences participating in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and professional development (PD) sessions as teachers before entering the program, the internship provided them with the occasion to engage with both of these professional learning opportunities in new ways. At the outset of the internship, many candidates attended PLCs and PD trainings; however, as the year progressed, they had opportunities to more directly lead and engage in the work. For example, Kendra reflected on the way she developed a new process to help reshape the culture in one PLC from "venting sessions" to solution-oriented discussions. She then reflected,

After [my first] meeting [with the PLC], our admin team sat down to discuss the questions/concerns raised during the meeting. I listed our responses on the PLC agenda and emailed the teacher assistants to put a new plan in place: from now on, I will ask for questions/concerns a week prior to our PLC meetings. I will discuss the items with Admin and bring responses/solutions to the meeting. . . . I went to the PLC lead and asked for her support in changing the dynamic of our meetings.

Two months later, Kendra wrote that their PLC meeting "went very well," as she continued to work with the team to focus on the "power of positive thinking." She concluded, "The meeting felt purposeful and everyone left smiling; I am thankful we are moving in the right direction!"

In addition to PLCs, candidates led professional development sessions. Xavier, who wrote that he did "not have a lot of experience presenting professional

development for teachers,” purposefully designed the session to be focused and actionable. He reflected:

One of my major accomplishments this week was leading a professional development opportunity for Beginning Teachers. I chose to design and present professional development focusing on Cold Call (Lemov). . . This responsibility encouraged me to be intentional about the learning objectives for the teachers and reflect on my own personal philosophy on professional development. Teachers are so busy and do not have a lot of extra time. Therefore, I chose to design a PD that would not be overwhelming in regard to the volume of information. I condensed the concepts down to the main ideas and gave helpful tips that could be used immediately in the classroom. Overall, the PD went well!

Interestingly, we noticed that this was the only time that Xavier had the opportunity to lead professional development. In fact, his reflections suggest that he was often engaged in the role of observer rather than leader. Which suggests an important finding—candidates’ experiences leading PLCs or professional development was often shaped by their relationship with their principal mentor and the school context in which they worked.

Discussion

In this study, we analyzed principal candidates’ weekly reflections to better understand the ways their conception of leadership developed over the course of their internship and identify the experiences candidates highlighted as most developmental to their growth as a school leader. As with prior research (Milittle et al., 2009; Murphy, 1992; Pounder & Crow, 2005; Salazar et al., 2013), we found that the internship provided candidates with an opportunity to connect their coursework to leadership practice. In particular, coursework that consistently emphasized the importance of building relationships, engaging in productive home and community visits, delegating leadership, leading teams, and engaging in restorative discipline practices were some of the most notable lessons candidates were able to apply in their internship. Many of the candidates reflected that they greatly underestimated the responsibilities of the principalship, and some reflected on feeling overwhelmed by the job (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Perez et al., 2011). Ideas of distributed leadership and organizational management moved from being abstract concepts to concrete experiences. Student discipline, in particular, offered fertile ground for candidates to engage in leadership practices that were unfamiliar and, at times, uncomfortable. This space of unfamiliarity and discomfort seemed to work together to humble candidates and make them more teachable and reflective (Havard et al., 2010), especially with their mentor principal and coach (Barnett & O’Mahony, 2012).

We also found that the internship provided a space for candidates to slow down and intentionally reflect on leadership. Candidates were initially engaged in observing their principal mentor or other assistant principals in a wide range of leadership actions, such as conducting classroom walkthroughs, performing formal evaluations,

engaging in student discipline, and leading professional development. After these experiences, some candidates were able to debrief the experience with their principal mentor or assistant principal. Student discipline and formal teacher evaluations, in particular, were times when candidates wanted to learn more about the school leaders' thinking and decision making. As found in the literature, these opportunities for joint-reflection seemed to be especially valuable in these candidates' learning and growth (Anderson & Shannon, 1988; Cheney et al., 2010; Fry-Ahearn & Collins, 2016; Perez et al., 2011).

Not surprisingly, the most significant growth in candidates' leadership came when they transitioned from observing school leaders engage in leadership to engaging in it themselves. For example, candidates who identified the overwhelming nature of the job also reflected on ways in which their school leader(s) delegated leadership responsibilities (Spillane et al., 2004). Yet, it was not until they were assigned their own responsibilities in leading a team or committee, or planning and delivering professional development, or monitoring the work of PLCs that they were able to learn important lessons about delegation and accountability. In addition, as a full-time administrator, principals and assistant principals could leave candidates in charge of covering the school in their absence. Being the sole leader in the building proved to be especially formative for candidates, as they not only felt the full weight of responsibility, but also learned how to rely on other school staff for support and guidance.

Conclusion

The internship taught principal candidates that the realities of school leadership cannot be fully understood within the confines of a university-based classroom. Full-time principal internships provided candidates with opportunities to connect theory and coursework to practice through experiential learning guided by principal mentors, university supervisors, and coaches (Barnett & O'Mahony, 2012; Clayton & Myran, 2013; Clayton et al., 2013; Militello et al., 2009; Murphy, 1992; Orr & Orphanos, 2011; Pounder & Crow, 2005; Rhodes & Fletcher, 2013; Salazar et al., 2013). Importantly, some candidates were afforded time to transition from observing school leaders to leading and facilitating critical school leadership events themselves. In particular, those times when candidates were the only administrator in the building were especially formative. In addition, the process of writing weekly reflections helped candidates make sense of their learning and identify areas for future growth and development. We believe the practice of reflective learning through journaling offers other principal preparation programs a way to monitor and guide the experiences of candidates to ensure that each candidate has a well-rounded residency and is fully prepared to be an educational leader.

We believe this study offers at least two important areas of future research. First, mentorship is crucial to successful learning experiences during the internship (Clayton & Myran, 2013; Clayton et al., 2013). Yet, the variation in candidates' experiences suggests that mentorship operates along multi-dimensional lines, with interns receiving varying levels of autonomy, support, inclusion, and responsibility. Future work

could examine the degree to which principal mentors' relationship with interns evolves (or fails to evolve) over the course of the internship, and how their relationship shape interns' learning and growth. Second, school context—and candidates' history with that school context—seems to play a role in shaping principal candidates' experiences. While research recognizes the important role of internship placement (e.g., Bottoms & O'Neill, 2001; Havard et al., 2010), we believe that future research should more systematically begin to examine the relationship between candidates' internship placement and learning. Importantly, each of these streams of research has practical implications for principal preparation programs and their district partners, including implications for how mentor principals are selected, trained, and supported, and how candidates are matched to particular mentors and school contexts.


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