The Effectiveness of an Online Principal Preparation Program

Yoko Miura, Ed.D.
Associate Professor
Department of Leadership Studies in Education & Organizations
Wright State University
USA

Grant Hambright, Ed.D.
Professor
Department of Leadership Studies in Education & Organizations
Wright State University
USA

Lynn Patrick Landis, Ed.D.
Assistant Professor
Department of Leadership Studies in Education & Organizations
Wright State University
USA

Abstract

Faculty at a medium sized pubic university in Ohio engaged in a participatory action research (PAR) to better understand how the characteristics of the online principal preparation program and the skills they acquire affect program candidates, individuals who are attracted to school leadership, using a two-phase data collection process in 2014-2015 and 2018-2019. The researchers discussed insights gleaned from principal candidates' reflections about program course content and affiliated activities, mentoring and field experiences, the soundness and patterns of their in-house developed principal program comprehensive exam, and faculty reflections while participating in PAR.

Key words: Principal Preparation Program, Online Program, Participatory Action Research (PAR), Student Experience, Faculty Reflection

The ultimate objective of this study was to better shape a university's online principal preparation program for meeting current challenges and needs within PK-12 school environments. Faculty at a medium sized pubic university in Ohio engaged in participatory action research (PAR) to better understand how the characteristics of the online principal preparation program and the skills they acquire affect program candidates, individuals who are attracted to school leadership. As we reviewed our results regarding the quality and characteristics of the program, we discussed insights gleaned from principal candidates' reflections about program course content and affiliated activities, mentoring and field experiences, and the soundness and patterns of our in-house principal program comprehensive exam as well as that comprehensive exam's relationship to the state's educational leadership licensure exam. We hope our program insights invite multiple conversations among the larger community of online principal preparation programs through examples shared from our program.

Context

The principal licensure program at this medium sized public university in the Midwest provides a preparation opportunity for educators with minimally two years teaching experience and current teaching license holders of Preschool, Kindergarten through 12th grade (PK-12) schools advancing their careers to become PK-12 principals and assistant principals. The preparation program started as a traditional on-campus program, revised to a hybrid modality around 2007, and eventually became a fully online program in 2011. The notion of PK-12 schools of the 21st century started to emphasize principals who are instructional leaders with management expertise and people skills that allow them to lead their faculty and staff in ways that produce successful students and schools. The principal preparation program in this study included standards-based coursework, field experience activities, and a portfolio in alignment with the *Educational Leadership Recognition Standards: Building Level* for institutions undergoing National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) Accreditation and Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) Program Review as of 2019.

Change of the standards for the principal preparation program

As we conducted the first phase of our study in the 2014-2015 academic year, we were aware of the coming changes in the ELCC standards. No official standards revisions which would influence our preparation program course designs and assessments were published at the time. Between 2015 and 2018, we were aware the new standards would take effect requiring modifications to our practices as early as 2018.

> The National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards were developed by a committee comprised of essential stakeholder communities from across the country. These preparation standards, formerly known as the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC standards), have been renamed the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards and will be used to guide program design, accreditation review, and state program approval.

The new NELP standards were to be aligned with the Professional Standards for Educational Leadership (PSEL), approved by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) in November 2015. They were developed "to review educational leadership programs through the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) advanced program review process" (NPBEA, n.d.). While the final NELP standards should have been available for use beginning in early 2017, this program study was on hold. In August 2018, the NELP standards were published to be implemented for the next accreditation review process (NPBEA, 2018). The second phase of this study examined the academic year 2018-2019 data, which would be the last year of our principal preparation program under the ELCC standards.

The assumptions of the building-level Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) standards (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2011) guide and shape the program's required coursework, field experience activities, and exit portfolio. The program coursework and field activities provide: (a) understanding of student achievement as a central interest of school leadership; (b) fundamental knowledge, skills, and practices intrinsic to building leadership that improves student learning; (c) leadership knowledge conceptually applicable to a range of common school leadership positions; (d) responsibility for managing the "business" of the school; (e) a well-established, research-based body of knowledge; (f) overt connections and bridging experiences between research and practice; (g) comprehensive, field-based practice in and feedback from the field over an extended period time in powerful clinical learning experiences; (h) ongoing experiences for candidates to examine, refine and strengthen an ethical platform guiding their decision-making; (i) the design, delivery and effectiveness of the program that invites P-12 participation and feedback; and (j) performance-based measures in evaluating candidate outcomes. The program's exit portfolio serves as a repository of candidate evidence supporting their mastery levels of the ELCC standards.

Local challenge at the university

Many institutions with similar principal preparation programs may share a mixture of challenges we faced since 2012. All state universities were mandated to change from a quarter to a semester academic calendar system, state standards changed, and new principal and teacher evaluation systems were introduced. As stated earlier, national standards' content were changed, thus, accreditation entity expectations subsequently changed. Additionally, the financial status of the university declined from fair to poor, resulting in rippling effects of financially focused decisions influencing even further program changes.

One example of such a change was a five-year contract with an online program manager (OPM) signed in 2012. The manager recommended program students complete 2 courses per semester scheduled in consecutive 7-week terms. Course curricula revisions accommodating the state-mandated 15-week semester academic calendar were then further revised per the OPM course scheduling recommendation. During academic year 2012 - 2013, boosted principal program enrollment entailed adjusting to rapid cycles of course preparation and delivery. Also, a faculty shortage and teaching overload problems resulted from exploded numbers in stacked courses.

Regional context of principal preparation program in Ohio

As of 2019, hours of course work among principal preparation programs in 22 Ohio institutions ranged between six to 52 credit hours, with an average of 31 credit hours. Some principal licensure programs had only internship course credit hours beyond any master's degree in a field of education without any preparation course requirements. Others required the completion of educational leadership courses after the completion of a master's degree, and up to 450 hours of field experiences. A few institutions required candidates pass the state educator licensure exam for educational administrators prior to issuing the educational administration or leadership degree. One institution offered a principal license option of a neighboring state, another institution offered a program specifically for China, and some others offered educational administration and leadership in specialized areas such as "urban" and "inspired principal" programs. One of the principal programs offered at a public university was operated by a business school. It offered scholarship tuitions and stipends to non-educators for obtaining credentials to lead schools without previous private or public teaching experiences and teaching licenses.

Modes of instructional delivery were also diverse; about 40% were programs taught entirely online, three programs were hybrid, and about 50% were traditional face to face programs. There were some variabilities among such "traditional" programs. Some institutions' cohorts met six Saturdays throughout the program which differs from other program having weekly face-to-face or web conferencing meetings. Internship or field experiences hours varied from 150 hours to 450 hours, and some programs did not have any specified numbers of hours for the principal internship. To compete against various choices available for principal candidates, we needed to appeal for larger public as well. Popularity of a "business school model" was evident across the nation and the 2016 U.S. presidential election took place while we prepared this manuscript. All such regional and national contexts impacted the motivation and decisions made by community leaders and people aspiring to be school principals. Our motivation for the study held steady to shedding light on the reality of principal preparation programs while keeping our aim of improving the quality of our program at the forefront as well.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to better shape our university's online principal preparation program for meeting current challenges and needs of building-level leaders within PK-12 school environments. To better understand how the characteristics of the online principal preparation program affect program candidates' knowledge and skills, we employed an interactive inquiry method through conversations to co-construct meanings within our data. Namely, participatory action research (PAR) methods as defined by James, Milenkiewicz, and Buchnam (2008), which emphasized reflective inquiry with ongoing collaboration among faculty in the principal preparation program. Specifically, we intended to: (1) Identify unique characteristics of the online principal preparation program, and (2) Measure the impact on the quality of building leadership among individuals who are attracted to school leadership and the skills they acquire during their preparation.

Online principal preparation program

Investigating Online Principal Preparation Programs (OPPP) brought some difficulties when comparing programs using traditional face-to-face instructional delivery and those employing online delivery.

Inclusive of both modes of instructional delivery, some efforts had been made to compare the course content of Principal Preparation Programs (PPP) utilizing course syllabi. The study concluded that there were similarities across the programs (Hess & Kelly, 2007). Large scale efforts based on the ELCC standards were made to compare and assess PPPs and OPPPs (Vogel & Weiler, 2014). Even with such efforts, generalizable conclusions about PPPs versus OPPPs were unclear in the current literature. However, some agreement among the literature was clear that there is a need to utilize standards such as the ELCC standards as the basis for these preparation programs, as well as a need to use the ELCC standards as the basis to assess the principal candidates' readiness (Vogel & Weiler, 2014; Yoder, Freed, & Fetters, 2014).

Additionally, the literature supported the value of field experiences or internships as a part of a quality program (Dodson, 2015). The most valuable field experiences involved practical, hands-on activities for typical principal responsibilities including handling the building's budget and finance, as well as leading site-based decision-making processes (Dodson, 2014). The value of internships in both PPP and OPPP programs was clearly illustrated (Orr & Ophanos, 2011). By using authentically contextualized case studies, online programs could have an advantage over traditional print scenarios, when these case studies strengthen the candidates' skills in data analysis, problem solving, and collaborative decision-making (Smith, 2008). To date, we have found no clear evidence confirming myths about OPPP deficiencies. It motivated us to conduct our research inquiry using a pragmatic approach to discern what is working and what could be improved by analyzing students' perspectives. Reflective student writing samples about our OPPP and interpreting the data collaboratively to derive meanings from those student narratives provided the basis for our research.

Using candidates' reflections for program improvement purposes

Reflective activities were implemented throughout our principal preparation program. Moreover, many course assignments for the principal candidates also contained concluding sections directing course participants to provide reflective responses to prescribed prompts. Course participants shared perceptions about their gained and/or deepened knowledge and skills from the content and associated activities in a given course. According to Schön (1987), this reflective activity would be classified as *reflection-on-action* as it considers past thoughts and actions. The course assignment reflection prompts further sought the course participants' current use of the added and/or furthered knowledge and skills within their current contexts. Schön deemed reflecting on current practical thought and action as *reflection-in-action*. The course assignment reflections also sought the course participants' responses to their projected use of acquired knowledge and skills within a school leadership role. Killion and Todnem (1991) expanded Schön's earlier reflective model to include this future-oriented perspective referred to as *reflection-for-action*. In our context, the course participants determined what their learnings were (i.e. reflection-on-action), how they used them (i.e., reflection-in-action), and what they foresaw the learnings use would be at a later time within a different professional role (i.e., reflection-for-action).

At the program's exit, candidates reflected on their cumulative learnings and skills by describing their most profound gained and/or deepened academic knowledge and attained field experience skills and projecting how those learnings and experiences would assist them in their future role as school leaders. The candidates' prior reflective practice from their course-level assignments served as foundational building blocks for constructing robust and meaningful program-level reflective responses. The end-of-program reflective responses pertained to the candidates' perceived content knowledge and skill acquisitions function as candidates' reflection-for-action as well as a vital data point within our ongoing program improvement efforts.

Sampson, Leonard, Ballenger, and Coleman (2010) reported from their survey research that student satisfaction with totally online principal program generally showed the candidates' expressions of higher satisfaction with understanding assessment, yet not quite satisfactory with comprehending teamwork. Criticisms of leadership preparation programs at universities generally centered around selection of the values to be taught, the inability to monitor quality of the program effectiveness, and weak research on program effectiveness (Cibulka, 2009). Issues facing PPP or OPPP programs are various: whether to include or not include state licensure and accreditation requirements intensified needs to examine program content; modifications of certification requirements; emerging trends of issuing principal licenses through alternative pathways; alignment with the national leadership standards; and, adapting standardized leadership assessments, to name a few criticisms (Roberts, 2008).

We determined that the candidates' comprehensive program exit reflections could serve as rich resources for assessing program strengths as well as highlighting areas for needed program improvements. The exit-level candidate reflections supplied us with an organic data resource (Hendricks, 2009; Glanz, 2014), since the reflections were required artifacts within the exiting candidates' program portfolios. The flow of exit-level reflections enabled the faculty to assess various program-level elements and previous-enacted revisions longitudinally.

Since candidates provided feedback regarding their profound learning experiences, we could glean from the submitted reflective narratives intended and unintended academic content and curricular activities deeply impacting the candidates' acquired learnings during their program journey.

Candidates were prompted to describe three specific examples of academic content and/or course activities having a profound affect on their learning. Exit course materials provided candidates, also referred to as interns during their practicum, with assignment exemplars demonstrating required formatting and recommended length; however, authentic narrative content is withheld to not to sway candidates toward perceived "correct" responses.

Candidates further submitted program-level reflective narratives related to their broad-based field experiences accrued throughout their program as well as their practicum's focused capstone project-related field activities were acquired through a separate reflective exit-level assignment. Within their field activity reflections, candidates provide insights on their acquired skills resulting from mentored leadership-oriented tasks via reflective portions of their ongoing activity logs. The practicum's capstone project provided culminating opportunities for the candidate/intern to lead peers, and potentially others, in a focused, collaboratively designed (i.e., site mentor, candidate/intern, and university advisor) initiative or task integrating and applying standards-based content knowledge and various professional leadership skills.

Research questions

1. What are the patterns of learned content evident in students' reflections and the program exit comprehensive exam?
2. How can the principal program be modified based on students' reflections and the program exit comprehensive exam?

Methodology

The ultimate objective of this phenomenological case study was to examine features of an online principal preparation program which were most effective in helping prospective principals.

Research design: Phenomenological case study using a PAR approach

We conducted a phenomenological case study employing the Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach as defined by James, Milenkiewicz, and Buchnam (2008) through examining both quantitative and qualitative data.

PAR is to be initiated by learning communities to "diagnose,' in other words, to "serve as participatory groups to evaluate what is currently known about the topic to be studied," according to James et al. (2008, p.15). Extant PAR literature suggested somewhat different research cylces. Out of many viable cycles, we believed the cycle starting with the diagnosis of the current status was most relevant for where our institution was located both historically and geographically. More specifically, we intended to carry out and repeat the same cycle of action throughout all phases of our ongoing study: (1) Diagnose, (2) Act, (3) Measure, and (4) Reflect (James et al., 2008). Our decision to apply PAR was based on our beliefs in the naturalistic inquiry approach which values and studies people's subjective experience, in contrast to the scientific positivism approach, which values and studies events and behaviors objectively (Stringer, 2004). This approach can also be defined to partially base on views of existentialists, in a sense that we valued subjective views of stakeholders (faculty) and 'skeptical' of existing value systems outside us since our OPPP was contextually bound. Also, we were sensitive to and conscientious of power structure of education systems, which indicated inequality and inequity to be addressed in our education systems at large, as seen in ELCC standards (NPBEA, n.d.).

Although we valued reflections as a critical piece for differentiating our research approach from conventional qualitative research (James et al., 2008), we did not start our inquiry cycle with individual student reflections as shown in the research cycle proposed by Hendricks (2017). Due to our context, daily challenges to meet multiple demands, response thriftiness, and the nature of employing a team-based approach, our inquiry started with collective reflections instead.

Participants

Participants of this study were principal program faculty, who collectively examined throughout all phases of the study anecdotal evidence using archived candidate data from an online principal preparation program.

Data

The PAR process involved interactive discussions within the program faculty. The team of four faculty served as critical friends to each other (Hendricks, 2017) as we collaboratively analyzed and interpreted the data.

Reflective thoughts of each faculty were shared at bi-weekly meetings during regular program meetings during spring 2015, fall 2018, and spring and fall 2019 for the student data analysis. Additionally, three of the four faculty met on a weekly basis between November 2019 and February 2020 in order to examine our reflexivity for the study's context.

Data collection procedure. There were two phases reported in this study. The first was from candidates who graduated between fall 2014 and spring 2015, and the second was from candidates who graduated between fall 2018 and spring 2019. All students in the datasets had already graduated by the time of the analysis, therefore, no risk or potential harm were involved for students. No consent was needed for our data collection since the data were part of regular activities within our regular educational practice settings and categorized as an exempted status study from the Internal Review Board (IRB) at the university. There was no need for recruitment of participants either, since data were limited to students who graduated from our principal preparation program. There was no exclusion of our graduates in this study. In phase one of this study, all student identifiers were stripped by graduate assistants (GA) who were not majoring in our programs prior to analysis. In the phase two, the faculty who cleaned the data had no interactions with students in the exit course where reflection data were extracted. All faculty of the program were involved in this PAR.

Two phases of the study. The initial stage of the study focused on the analysis of archived 2014-2015 data of principal preparation program students. All data were collected as part of regular educational activities throughout the online principal preparation program and were stored in the form of an electronic portfolio. Each faculty who assessed the principal candidates' portfolio downloaded candidates' reflections and sent them to the faculty and graduate assistants who were not involved in the portfolio evaluation process. The program exam data were collected and stored in Qualtrics as candidates completed the program and then downloaded prior to the analysis to match with other archival data. Faculty who did not teach the exit course stripped student identifiers to protect student identities prior to the analysis.

The Online Principal Program Comprehensive Exam was developed in 2014-2015 with 35 question items addressing content from nine core courses and piloted between fall 2014 and fall 2015 ($n = 53$). Candidates who took this exam were 40% male and 56% female (4% did not respond). Most candidates (98%) worked in public schools and had not had administrative experiences prior or during the principal preparation program. The reported teaching experience of the candidates ranged from 4 to 20 years, with 50% or more having more than 10 years of experience.

In the second stage between fall 2018 and spring 2019, two courses were offered involving a total of 20 students. There were 9 female students (64%), and 5 male students (36%) who completed the comprehensive exam ($n =14$, 70%). Most candidates (93%) worked in public schools. The reported teaching experience of the candidates ranged from 4 to 20 years, with 50% having more than 10 years of experience.

Data collection. Besides the faculty reflection of ongoing analysis, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected from principal candidates in our OPPP. Quantitative data were in-house comprehensive exam scores obtained within the candidates' exit course. Qualitative data included candidates' reflective statements completed during their exit course and archived in the program portfolio.

Instrument: Comprehensive exam. The in-house comprehensive exam was created by gathering the content of nine courses offered in 2014. The content-expert faculty for each course contributed three to five multiple choice items reflecting "key" course content. All items were compiled and yielded 35 total items. The item-analysis of this exam was conducted for establishing reliability and validity, for it is the basis for building a predictive model of candidate performance in the future.

Instrument: Researchers. In phenomenological studies, researchers are instruments (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As instruments in a phenomenological case study using PAR approach, it is important to identify who faculty-researchers were in this analysis, in order to establish credibility, trustworthiness and dependability of the analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Crewell and Poth (2018) argued that "the procedures, illustrated by Moustakas (1994), consist of identifying a phenomenon to study, bracketing out one's experiences, and collecting data from several persons who have experienced the phenomenon" (p.78).

However, we also recognized that we could not completely isolate our identities and experience as we interacted to interpret the data together towards "improvement in the lives of those involved, as they define change or improvement" (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009, p. 82). For those reasons, we chose to disclose our positionality, so that the readers could make decisions regarding trustworthiness.

Our disclosures for the interpretation of the data are as follows.

> FR 1   Asian female with 13 years of program faculty experience. She had lived in three countries, having educator background mostly in the U.S. urban schools. Although her personal worldview is more rooted in constructivism-interpretivism arena with focus on advocacy and representation of marginalized groups, she has grounded most of her scholarly work as university faculty as a pragmatist, for her primary area of expertise is in evaluation and research.
>
> FR 2   White male, 20 years program faculty experience, and 17 years of teaching and leading experience in southwestern U.S. rural schools. He taught middle and high school students in fine arts and social studies, and he served as a district-level curriculum and federal programs director. The experiences he had in leading the district's Title I programs enhanced his philosophical orientation rooted in progressivism, a branch of pragmatism.
>
> FR 3   White male and new tenure-track assistant professor in the educational administration program. He spent eight years as a school district superintendent and twelve years as a high school principal prior to starting a new career in higher education. In addition to 30 years of experience in the PK-12 sector. While working as a superintendent and principal, he had the opportunity to serve as an on-site mentor and supervisor for numerous teachers and administrators who were pursuing advanced degrees or certifications in educational administration.

Findings

In this section, we discussed findings based on the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data from our Online Principal Preparation Program (OPPP) candidates. All data were analyzed collaboratively among the program faculty in this phenomenological case study using a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were the in-house comprehensive exam scores. First, we examined the reliability and the validity of the comprehensive exam as an instrument. Next, we examined qualitative data in a form of course reflection narratives. Because researchers are also an instrument in a phenomenological study, faculty reflections occurred while examining student data, which were used to examine the effectiveness of the OPPP.

Principal Program Comprehensive Exam in 2014-2015. Exam scores were imported from Qualtrics to SPSS 23.0 prior to the analysis. To improve the quality of the comprehensive exam, the test reliability using Cronbach's alpha, as well as item difficulty and item discrimination were calculated. Using the Cronbach's alpha, the reliability of the program principal exam indicated a high reliability (α = .945), with the average item difficulty of .575 and the average item discrimination of .60. It is common that "reliability estimates of 0.80 or more are considered acceptable in many testing situations and are commonly reported for group and individually administered achievement and personality tests" (Reynolds, Livingston, & Willson, 2009, p.108) and many high-stakes tests such as statewide achievement tests. The desirable item difficulty index range is between 0.40 and 0.60, and the item discrimination index above 0.40 or larger is considered to be excellent (Reynolds, Livingston, & Willson, 2009). However, in order to improve the assessment quality, one item was recommended for further examination with a potential replacement with a new item because both item difficulty and item discrimination were 0. Although content validity existed based on faculty expertise at the time of the exam's development, we concluded that the removal or replacement of this item should establish better validity after re-examining the exam with different student populations in the future.

Course reflections of 2014-2015. We used inductive thematic analysis (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013), and sought emerged themes from the data (n =53) to inform principal preparation program modifications. In summary, we concluded that: (1) patterns of principal candidate reflections were conceptually well balanced; (2) more advanced courses have shown more association with cognitively higher learning; and (3) many candidates struggle changing perspective from s classroom-level focus to a building-level focus.

In phase two, we examined principal preparation program course content proposed in Kelly and Hess (2007), and constructivist perspectives to guide instructional leadership defined by Hoy and Hoy (2003). The frequencies of course content mentioned in the student reflection were shown in the Figure 1. As shown in the figure, principal candidates most frequently reflected on the impact of culture and change process, as well as ethics and politics in education through our OPPP.

Figure 1

Portfolio Reflection References of the Courses in Fall 2014- Spring 2015
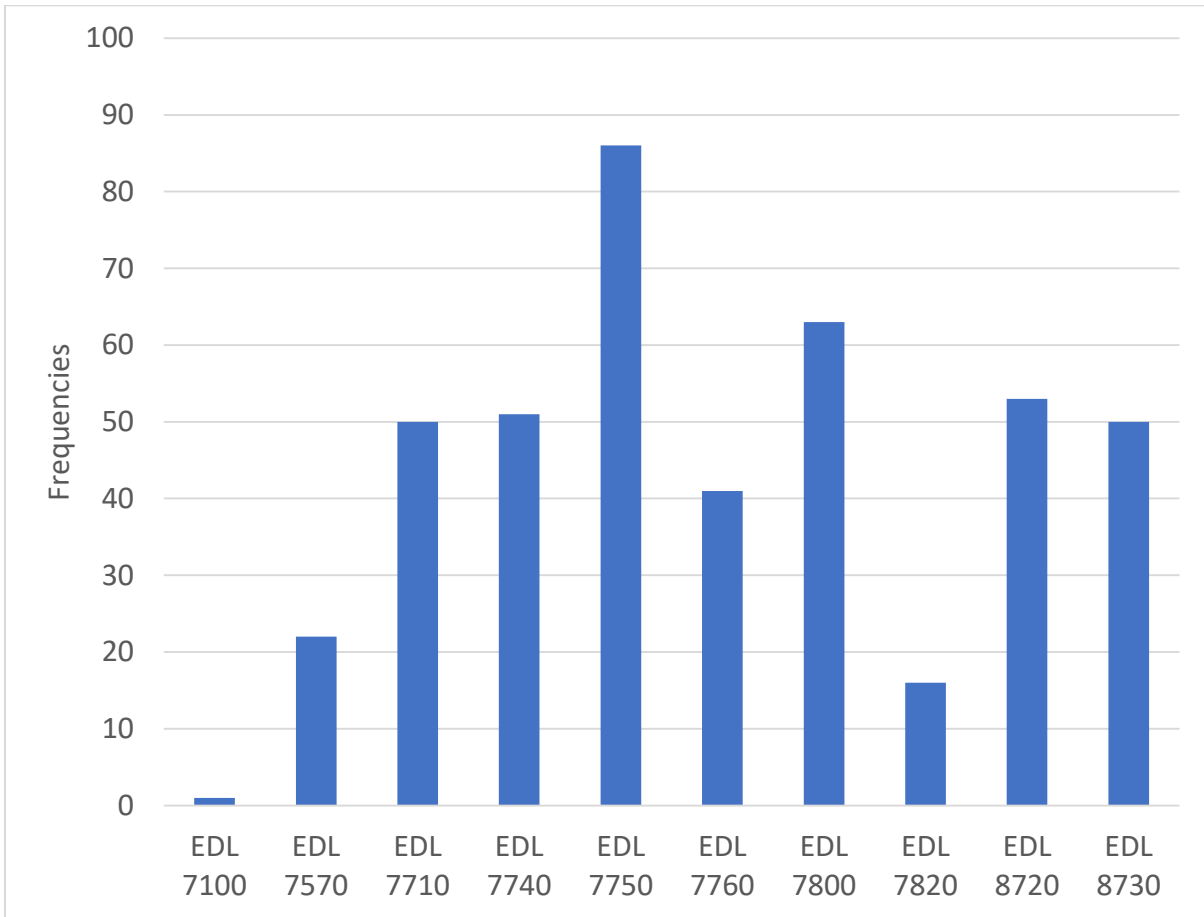
Note: The course contents were as follows. EDL 7100 Orientation. EDL 7570 Student Assessment. EDL 7710 Foundation of Educational Leadership. EDL 7740 Analysis of Teaching. EDL 7750 School Culture and Change. EDL 7760 Supervision of Instruction. EDL 7800 Ethics and Politics in Education. EDL 7820 School Law. EDL 8720 School Leadership. EDL 8730 Physical, Fiscal, and Pupil Personnel Management.

In the next section, we discussed how we synthesized implications of the data analysis in our PAR process.

PAR in 2018-2019

Program faculty analyzed past practicum interns' program reflection narratives to discern the interns' perspectives of their gained and/or deepened understandings and skills from their completed program coursework and field activities. Deep conversations between the faculty resulted from the reflection narratives' analyses. The discussions provided opportunities for the experienced faculty to provide historical views on how student perspectives have evolved or remained consistent and resounded common thematic strands over time. The discussions also openly spawned inquiry from the less experienced faculty, with some of their questions being focused on program processes as well as other questions involving program substance.

Positionality of faculty-researcher. In looking back on the conversations, it should be noted that the participating faculty –researcher (FR) had a wide span of program experience: one individual having 20 years, a second individual with 13 years, and a third individual having less than a year. Besides program experience, our FR team were diverse in lived experiences.

Our principal preparation program operates with collaboration as in a great amount of our lives involving interactions with others. Natural course of research inquiry for us was indicative of this realty. Decisions we make about principal candidates, preparation course content, activities, and evaluation, are constantly evolving; reflective of our daily lives as university faculty, whose past experiences range in various leadership and life as scholars experiences. True to the methodology, we took a team approach to diagnosing, acting on, and measuring experiences as described in the principal candidates' reflections and repeated this cycle. FR 1 reflected:

> There is much more to gain from multiple perspectives – to comb and cipher meanings of different peoples' narratives requiring so much of our interactions. We verbalized individual interpretations, had hours of dialogues about meanings of narrative texts shown in the student reflections, and co-reconstructed deeper meanings to capture what had actually happened in the students' lives to grow and to gain insights as leaders.

Portfolio review findings of 2018-2019 data. Reviewing program-level reflections of students who completed the principal preparation program provided useful insights for program evaluation purposes. Student reflections were carefully reviewed to identify patterns of responses and the use of key terms. It was evident that not all students enrolled in the OPPP were involved in public PK-12 education. Those students did not appear to have field experiences that were as deep and rich as OPPP students who were working in public PK-12 environments. There also appeared to be noticeable differences in the portfolio reflections of students who were committed to being building-level leaders and those who planned to stay in specialized roles such as curriculum leadership or special education supervision. The OPPP is designed and intended to develop future principals in the public PK-12 sector. The realization that not all OPPP participants follow the principal pathway lends itself to further discussion and research around the evaluation of the program**.**

The reflective narratives' discussions highlighted several key points. First, an intern's selected capstone project appears to serve as a critical element of a candidate's overall program experience, as it designed to do. The project should afford candidates with authentic hands-on applications of content knowledge and skills acquired throughout their program. Second, field experience activities serve yet another critical perspective point for interns. Supporting both the capstone project and the field activities is the guidance, or the lack of same, of the intern's mentor as a third pivotal program element highlighted by interns. The well-worn adage, "You get out of something, what you put into it," supports the previously stated three points. Interns who have the good fortune of working alongside a caring experienced mentor tend to acquire essential knowledge and hone critical skills in school leadership and management.

Faculty-Researcher reflection. Program faculty carved out blocks of time to meet and review responses. The discussions that occurred went beyond simply reviewing responses and helped facilitate the philosophical direction of the program, content of the program, and a mutual understanding of program expectations. Faculty acknowledged a common belief that the program is effective for those students who plan to pursue careers as building-level leaders as the program is designed. The need for future study was identified in certain areas.

FR 3 stated:

> The review of program portfolios was a valuable exercise allowing faculty to meet and intently discuss and analyze responses to reflection questions as answered by students in the program.

FR 1 framed:
> It was not surprising for me to learn that students gained much from their capstone project, as they acted to exercise leadership knowledge, to learn from trials and errors in their projects, and to test and modify knowledge they cultivated during their course works.

FR 2 indicated:

> I have mixed feelings about not finding many student reflective comments citing individual courses as sources of their attained skills or knowledge – does it mean that they absorbed content from those courses and succeeded in growing intellectually beyond a basic level, or perhaps discrete knowledge was not retained in their long-term memory? We do not know yet. We saw widely different foci in their reflections – does it mean one could only gain so much within the parameters of who they are, or do the students' narratives not fully capture of all the experiences they have had?

To seek the implications for our future, FR1 reflected:

> In short, paying deep attention to their narratives generated more questions that we could not answer. It would be easy to conclude that our program did well in preparing principals– but questions remain. We refused to accept the status quo and maintain what we offer now – we wanted to do better, better experiences and better program content to best prepare our candidates for the life of principals – not just better. In a way, this unrealistic high expectation was our driving force in continuing our inquiry. For the next step of finding out what we did not know, we concluded that we needed to interact with ex-students and other faculty.

Discussion

An opportunity for future study exists in examining data collected from OPPP graduates working in the field as building-level administrators. Current data collected from pre-service PK-12 school administrators indicates perceptions regarding the OPPP process prior to serving in a building-level administration capacity.

Implications for online principal preparation programs

Data will be collected from program graduates to determine if pre-service perceptions have changed. As displayed by Marshall and Rossman (2016), this effort can be defined as member checks in a sense of expanded PAR effort. This will allow us to search for discrepant evidence and negative cases to truly tailor our Online Principal Preparation Program (OPPP) to be practical for school leadership practitioners. In addition to reviewing perceptions of the program, data will be collected and tracked to determine the number of OPPP participants who have entered building-level administration roles after completing our OPPP program. National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) warned us that "one out of every two principals are not retained beyond their third year of leading a school" (2020, para 1). Since the demand for elementary, middle, and high school principals will grow by about 6 % by 2022, it is critical that practicing principals will remain in the field to mentor new principals (NASSP, 2020). We identified that it is critical to do follow-up surveys with students who have completed the OPPP. The number of graduates who become building-level leaders will be determined allowing further reflection on the effectiveness of the OPPP from a retrospective view to offer support for those in the field and to inform us for tailoring OPPP pragmatically for the needs of the society.

We concluded that the time has passed to be selective about an ideal environment from which to prepare principal candidates. Our study attempted to examine means for achieving rigor within online preparation processes available for principals of the future.

References

Browne-Ferrigno, T., & Muth, R. (2012). Call for research on candidates in leadership

preparation programs. *Planning & Changing, 43*(1), 10-24.
http://ezproxy.libraries.wright.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&d
b=ehh&AN=79201310&site=ehost-live

Brydon-Miller, M., & Maguire, P. (2009). Participatory action research: contributions to the development of practitioner inquiry in education. *Educational Action Research, 17*(1). 79–93.

Caruthers, L., & Friend, J. (2014). Critical pedagogy in online environments as thirdspace: A narrative analysis of voices of candidates in educational preparatory programs. *Educational Studies, 50*(1), 8-35. doi:10.1080/00131946.2013.866953

Chitpin, S. (2014). Principals and the professional learning community: Learning to mobilize knowledge. *International Journal of Educational Management, 28*(2), 215-229. doi:10.1108/IJEM-04-2013-0044

Choi, C. C., Browne-Ferrigno, T., & Muth, R. (2005). An exploration of online peer interaction among preparing school leaders. *Educational Leadership & Administration: Teaching & Program Development, 17*, 101-114.
http://ezproxy.libraries.wright.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&d
b=ehh&AN=18569381&site=ehost-live

Cibulka, J. G. (2009). Declining support for higher-education leadership preparation programs: An analysis. *Peabody Journal of Education*, *84*(3,) 453-466.

Cresswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches.* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Dodson, R. L. (2015). Which field experiences best prepare future school leaders? An analysis of
Kentucky's principal preparation program. *International Journal of Education Policy &   Leadership*, *10*(7), 1-21.

Glanz, J. (2014). *Action research: An educational leader's guide to school improvement* (3rd ed.). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Guest, G., Namey, E. E., & Mitchell, M. L. (2013). *Collecting qualitative data: A field manual for applied research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Hackmann, D. G., & McCarthy, M. M. (2011). Clinical faculty in educational leadership programs: A growing force. *Planning & Changing, 42*(3), 183-208.
http://ezproxy.libraries.wright.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&d
b=ehh&AN=95314731&site=ehost-live

Hendricks, C. (2009). *Improving schools though action research: A comprehensive guide for educators* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Hendricks, C. (2017). *Improving schools through action research: A reflection practice approach.* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Hess, F. M., & Kelly, A. (2007). Learning to lead: What gets taught in principal-preparation programs. *Teacher College Record,109*(1).

Hoy, A. W., & Hoy, W. K. (2013). *Instructional leadership: A learning-centered guide for Principals.* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Huber, S., & Hiltmann, M. (2011). Competence profile school management (CPSM) - an inventory for the self-assessment of school leadership. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation & Accountability, 23*(1), 65-88. doi:10.1007/s11092-010-9111-1

James, E. A., Milenkiewicz, M. T., & Buckham, A. (2008). *Participatory action research for educational leadership: Using data-driven decision making to improve schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Killion, J. P., & Todnem, G. R. (1991). A process for building personal theory. *Educational Leadership*, *48*, 14 – 16

Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2016). *Designing qualitative research.* (6th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

National Association for Secondary School Principals. (2020). *Principal shortage.* https://www.nassp.org/policy-advocacy-center/nassp-position-statements/principal-shortage/

National Policy Board for Educational Administration. (n.d.). *NELP & ELCC standards*. http://npbea.org/nelp/

Orr, M. T., & Orphanos, S. (2011). How graduate-level preparation influences the effectiveness   of school leaders: A comparison of the outcomes of exemplary and conventional   leadership preparation programs for principals. *Educational Administration Quarterly*,   *47*(1), 18-70.

Reynolds, C. R., Livingston, R. B., & Willson, V. (2009). *Measurement and assessment in education*. (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Roberts, B. (2008). School leadership preparation: A national view. *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin*, *75*(2), 5-19.

Sampson, P. M., Leonard, J., Ballenger, J. W., & Coleman, J. C. (2010). Student satisfaction of   online   courses for educational leadership. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, *13*(3).

Sherman, W. H., & Beaty, D. M. (2007). The use of distance technology in educational leadership preparation programs. *Journal of Educational Administration, 45*(5), 605-620. http://ezproxy.libraries.wright.edu:2048/login?url=http://search. ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ehh&AN=26900399&site=ehost-live

Schön, D. A. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Smith, S. (2008). Developing decision making using online contextualized case studies.   *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, *3*(3).

Stringer, E. (2004). *Action research in education*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Tonsmeire, J. K., Blanc, K., Bertani, A., Garton, S., Whiteley, G., Domaradzki, L., & Kane,

C. (2012). The rural Alaska principal preparation and support program: A comprehensive approach to strengthening school leadership in rural Alaska. *Advances in Educational Administration, 17*, 183-207. doi:10.1108/S1479-3660(2012)0000017013

University Council for Educational Administration. (n.d.). *Leadership standards development.* http://www.ucea.org/initiatives/1523/

Vogel, L. & Weiler, S. C. (2014). Aligning preparation and practice: An assessment of coherence in state principal preparation and licensure. *NASSP Bulletin*, *98*(4), 324-350.

Yoder, N., Freed, D., & Fetters, J. (2014). *Improving school leader preparation: Collaborative   models for measuring effectiveness.* Centers on Great Teachers and Leaders at American Institute for Research. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED555659.pdf