

School Leader Skill Development on the Job: Synopsis of Research and Major Findings

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Summary of Study

According to Leithwood et al. (2004), leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school (Wallace Foundation, 2008, 2013). Yet according to multiple studies, principal preparatory programs are often insufficient to prepare school leaders (SLs) for the demands of the job, and professional development for SLs is sporadic at best (Alvoid & Black, 2014; Chapman, 2005; Gray et al., 2007). Moreover, a common finding across studies of principal retention is that schools with a high percentage of poor students, minority students, and/or low-performing students, experience more principal turnover than their counterparts (Loeb, Kalogrides, & Lai Horng, 2009; as cited in Burkhauser et al., 2013). The job of a principal can often be daunting and therefore, principals need support and professional development in order to build their leadership skills to be effective.

In this study, the researcher wanted to answer the following research question: How do K-12 assistant principals and principals develop their leadership skills and practices on the job after their pre-service programs in various school contexts? The researcher used purposive sampling, gathering participants from a state association of school principals in New England. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant and used the Dreyfus & Dreyfus Five Stage Model of Adult Skill Acquisition (The Model) results as well as documents to support the participants' perceived skill level. Inductive analysis was used to analyze the interviews, The Model, and document examination. Then, a cross-case analysis was conducted to reveal practices school leaders have developed on the job in order to be effective leaders in their school contexts. In order to address issues of trustworthiness, researcher utilized member checking, triangulation (interviews, skill model, and document examination), coding strategy, peer review, and thick description to address credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Findings

The analysis revealed that having a mentor and utilizing other leaders within their school district assisted in participants' skill development. Further, the cross-case analysis revealed that leaders of all skill levels spoke to developing similar practices to be effective in their school contexts. There were no noteworthy differences between those skills and practices utilized by school leaders in different contexts. All participants approached their leadership and used similar skills and practices despite their school context. There was a distinction between knowing yourself as a leader, as defined as Self, and knowing how to manage others, defined as Others (see Figure 1).

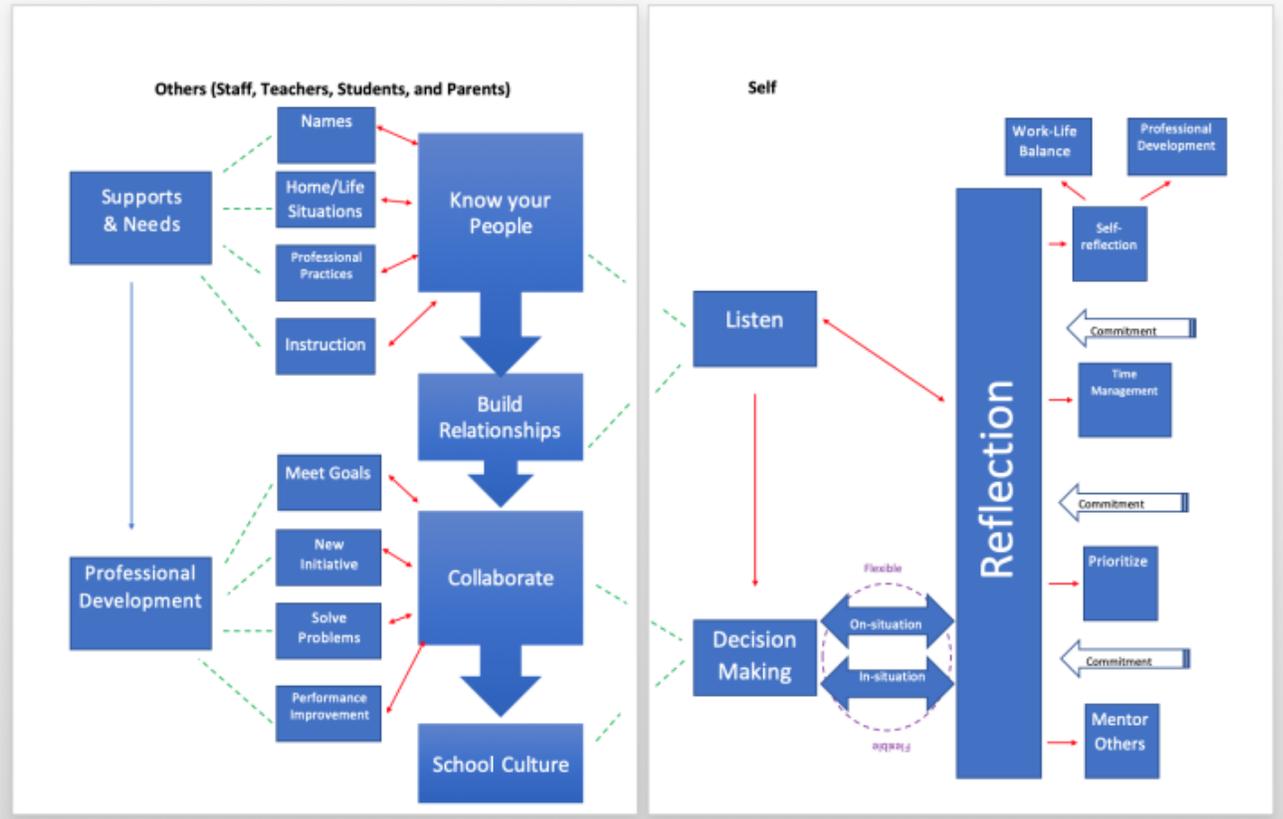


Figure 3. Knowing Self and Others

In Figure 1, “Others” refers to the people SLs organize, other than themselves, in order to meet the goals of the school. The others are students, teachers, staff, parents, school board members, constituents, and so on. When asked what leadership skills and practices the SLs used at their schools to be effective, participants often spoke of organizational management. Often, participants spoke to how they get “their people,” as if they were chess pawns, strategically placed in the unseen fabric that forms the school culture. Further, SLs spoke about the thought process and practices they use in order to manage the many issues and obstacles they have to face. Participants reported the need to have an understanding of themselves as leaders in order to manage others (staff, teachers, students, and parents) efficiently in working toward building a positive school culture. Participants reported seeing themselves as learners within their context in order to be effective and improve their skills as a leader. Participants reported using their context as a basis for reflection and developing their skills.

Richard Elmore (2006) would argue that the findings in Figure 1 show that participants practice through an inspirational view, meaning that the organization speaks to providing teachers with autonomy and accommodates them within the school context (Elmore, 1996). What is interesting about this is that participants highlighted being in a constant adaptive state, one of the challenges to their skill development. While the inspirational view often leads to high levels of parent satisfaction and helping schools rationalize reforms, participants reported this constant state of change was a challenge to their skill development (Elmore, 1996). This supports the finding that being in an adaptive state is a challenge for school leaders.

Further, the evidence signifies that having a mentor and developmental network of support assisted in the development of SLs (Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2018; New York Leadership Academy, 2015). Having an official or self-proclaimed mentor helped participants understand a problem globally and see all sides of the problem before coming to a decision. In turn, mentors assisted school leaders in developing their decision-making skills. Drago-Severson (2009) said, “Leadership is doing the right thing: management is doing things right” (p. 32). Having a mentor to talk through issues with helped SLs essentially think like a leader (New York Leadership Academy, 2015; Peno & Mangiante, 2012). Furthermore, participants reported having a supportive network of people to turn to whenever they needed to access support or knowledge. This network was composed of fellow assistant principals and principals in and out of district, the superintendent in the district, and teachers within the district. Having access to mentors and a developmental network assisted SLs in making mindful decisions and showed them the importance of reflection in order to develop their skills further.

The results also indicate that school leaders utilize their own professional development to develop their knowledge and understanding of their leadership skills. All participants reported seeing organizational management in the way presented in Figure 1. The findings in Figure 1 also support the notion that SLs are more focused on organizational leadership than instruction and professional practice. This finding suggests that SLs may not have been prepared effectively to deal with organizational management as well as issues of instruction and student achievement in their pre-service programs or that a lack of mentoring to navigate all aspects of a SL’s role was detrimental. This is supported by Brazer and Bower (2012) and Wallace Foundation (2013) who found that few principal preparatory programs focus more on instruction than on organizational leadership. An understanding of effective instruction and how to support teachers, as well as organizational management, has to be present in order for the SL to be effective in their role.

Further, school leaders felt inclined to seek a leadership position and pursue professional development when they felt a sense of commitment to their school and work. Five participants in particular were former teachers and grew while new programs were being developed at their schools. Growing with their districts and feeling a sense of belonging gave them confidence to lead and grow with their schools. Using collaboration as a way to support and insure commitment from all constituents within the school was supported in the findings (Darling-Hammond, 2012; Drago-Severson, 2009; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2018; Wallace Foundation, 2008, 2013). It is clear that participants utilized shared leadership models that put collaboration at the fore to increase their capacity as a SL. Therefore, the researcher suggests there is a need to find SLs that are a good fit for the school district and vice versa.

Reflection was another finding that assisted with decision making as well as work-life balance. All participants reported some challenge with finding the ideal work-life balance. In the article titled “Principal Under Pressure” in *Education Week*, one principal reports, “I have seen way too many people get burned out...there needs to be a balance between [our] professional and personal lives, and that we are much more effective in each when it’s in balance” (Mitchell, 2018, p. 11). One participant reported missing out on his child’s preschool graduation because of work. Another participant left the principal job for two years and then returned as an assistant principal at another school because his work-life balance was askew. To have a strong work-life balance, participants reported constantly reflecting on time management, mentoring others, and

prioritizing their to-do lists, but also reflecting on self and how the work was affecting them personally. This struggle among school leaders was reported at various levels of skill development. This finding shows that SLs not only struggle with building efficiency in organizational management, but also managing conflicting responsibilities. Reflecting on self and viewing themselves as a learner within their school context assisted the SLs in understanding where to draw the line between ending their work for the day or week and going to enjoy some time to themselves (Drago-Severson, 2009; Kaser, 1982).

In terms of developing leadership practices to build school culture, participants reported that their practices involved others. Getting all to be committed to the school culture is knowing your people. Knowing the people who work within the school context helps a school leader understand what supports and needs they have and how to navigate relationships for collaboration and professional development needs. To some, emotional intelligence (EQ) is more important than intelligence (IQ) in attaining success in a profession today because professions depend on our ability to read other people's signals and react appropriately to them (Bressert, 2018). Participants said that during their first years on the job, they focused on getting to know their people in and out of school and building relationships to assist with how they would utilize them within the greater organization to meet school goals.

Having relationships and understanding people's lives (i.e., names, home/life situations, professional practice, and instruction) assisted them in moving the mission and vision of the school forward. Bolman and Deal (2013) suggested when people and organizations fit, both benefit: "individuals find meaningful and satisfying work, and organizations get the talent and energy they need to succeed" (p. 135). Building relationships between people and supporting them in the work of the mission and vision of school, can build a positive school culture (Drago-Severson, 2009; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2018).

In all, the research found that there are on-going supports after pre-service programs for school leaders to improve their skill development across the state. However, the urban and charter schools seem to be utilizing these supports more often. This finding aligns with the higher levels of need that may exist within these districts; however, some of these supports are grant funded, and the researcher cannot speak to how the grants are awarded. It is important for a school leader to have a mentor, formal or informal, to help them develop their decision-making abilities. It is also important for a school leader to understand and define their developmental network of support available to them in a time of need. SLs should always seek their own learning opportunities to become a leader. Finally, possessing and developing a reflective mindset was a crucial skill and practice SLs possessed in order to be effective in their jobs.

Implications

The job of the school leader is more than managing people on a daily basis (See Figure 2). A school leader's job has shifted from being a manager to an instructional leader (Brazer & Bower, 2012; Drago-Severson, 2009; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2018; Johnson, 1996). Changes in the principalship have been occurring as a result of large-scale reforms at the policy level, resulting from the determination to ensure the provision of quality schooling (Chapman,

2005; Elmore, 1996). The role of a SL now focuses on ensuring all students receive high quality instruction as well as the organizational management within the context of the school (Brazer & Bower, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2012).

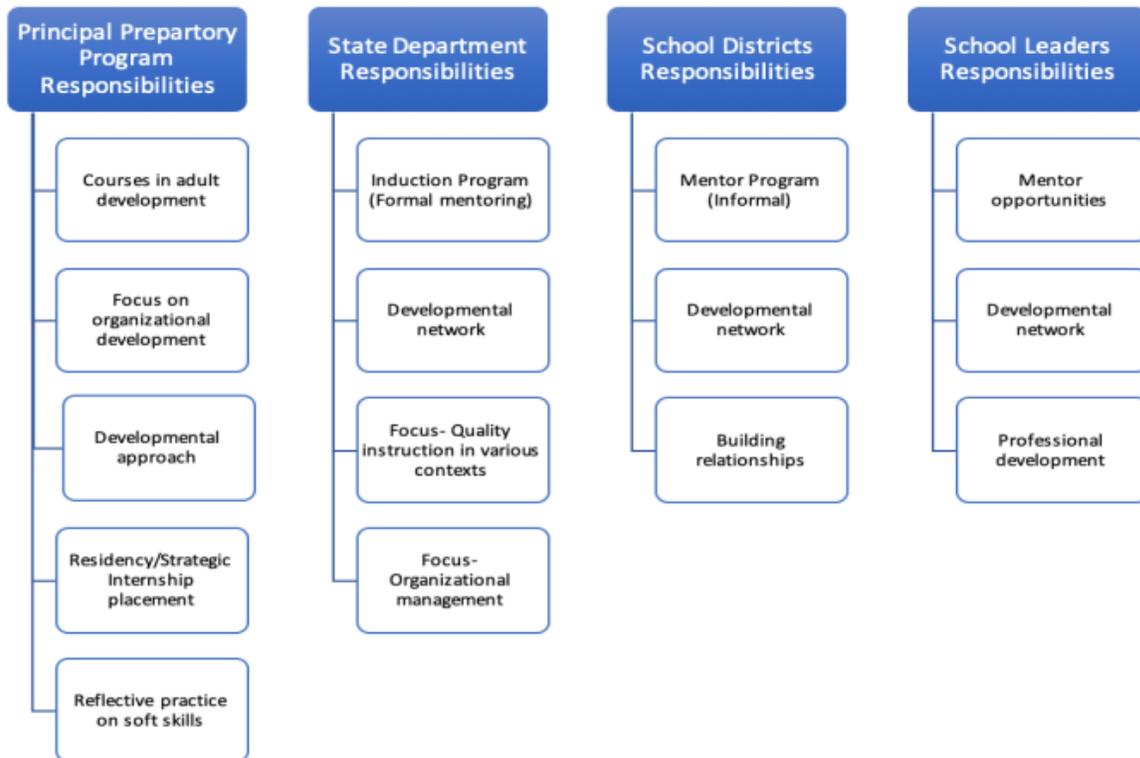


Figure 4. Division of Responsibilities

There needs to be a call for principal preparation programs to focus on instructional leadership, as well as organizational development to assist SLs in being more prepared to balance the multiple roles of the job (Darling-Hammond, 2012; Neumerski, 2012; Wallace Foundation, 2013). If changes in the job have occurred for the principal, then the changes need to be identified and carried out in principal preparation programs, state policy, and school districts. Further, SLs need to see themselves as a learner within this adaptive process.

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