LINKING RESEARCH TO CLINICAL PRACTICE: INSIGHTS FROM THE TRANSFORMATIONAL PATHWAYS IN AN ADMINISTRATOR PREPARATION PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

This study is situated within a larger research initiative in a university-based School of Education that is continuing accreditation with the Council of Educator Preparation Programs. With a focus on candidates in the educational administrator program, this study examined how key assessments were used in clinical practice to support candidates. This includes the development of research, knowledge, skills, and critical reflection as candidates grow into their roles as visionary leaders who understand the problems of practice influencing student outcomes. The specific research questions that informed the broad study included the following:

1. *What design elements of clinical practice allow candidates to understand problems of practice in educational administration through adaptable, contextualized, and authentic strategies?*
2. *In what ways do these elements and measures align with the taxonomy of best practices, theory, and research in assessing candidates and clinical practice?*
3. *How do candidates perceive the effectiveness of these measures in clinical practice to assess their understanding of the problems of practice in educational administration?*

As we considered the research influencing this study, it was clear that two major gaps in existing literature warrant investigation. First, there is dearth of research examining the knowledge, skills, and dispositions candidates gain in educational administration preparation programs and the second is possible changes that occur in schools led by the graduates of these programs. Such paucity in scholarship creates the need for a new research agenda—examining the design elements of clinical practices and candidate assessment measures in an educational administration preparation program. This understanding will inform how preparation influences candidates' abilities to shape the instructional culture to improve student learning.

INTRODUCTION TO THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This work explored how administrative interns bridge the gap between theory and practice as a candidate engages with and learn from an experienced mentor to navigate problems of practice, as well as to gauge the effectiveness of the internship experience. Adult learning theory (Knowles, 1980) and job-embedded learning, which may be referred to as clinical practice, internship, practicum, or fieldwork, provide useful frames through which to view the work. Like other fields, to meet the needs of adult learners through job-embedded experiences, such as the administrative internship, an understanding of adult learning theory is imperative. The following sections outline how adult learning theory was used as a theoretical lens to conceptualize job-

embedded learning to understand how administrative interns identify problems of practice, utilize best practices, and assess the overall effectiveness of the administrative internship.

Job-Embedded Learning and Adult Learning

The early work of Lindeman (1926) and Dewey (1938) influenced the centrality of actual experience in knowledge creation as the hallmark of adult learning in education. This concept is perhaps a present-day axiom in schools of education that provides opportunities for students enrolled in educational administration programs to develop understanding through action (Schön, 1983; Wilson, 1993). Related theories of situated cognition describe knowledge built from authentic activity embedded in specific situations (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Schön, 1983). Examples include "cognitive apprenticeships" (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and cycles of experiential learning that are concrete and active (Kolb, 1984). Self-directed learning can address what Knowles (1980) described as adults' needs to learn and connect new learning to prior experience, solve real-life problems, and apply knowledge. In other words, adults are far from a *tabula rasa*; their slates are full of experiences to build on as they progress through learning opportunities, and they are motivated to do so.

Consistent with adult learning theory is the use of job-embedded learning (also known as clinical practice, practicum, fieldwork, and internships). Well-designed job-embedded learning that is practical beyond passive shadowing exercises can allow aspiring school leaders to authentically engage in leadership responsibilities (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, & Orr, 2007; Fry, Bottoms, O'Neill, & Walker, 2007; Levine, 2005; Southern Regional Education Board [SREB], 2005). As seen in other fields, such as medicine and business, these culminating experiences serve as an authentic setting for a final rite of passage before becoming a professional (Education Development Center, 2009; Task Force on Teacher Preparation and Initial Professional Development, 2004). Job-embedded learning for aspiring school leaders exploring the complex nature of school leadership vary widely in depth, emphasis, and quality (Perez, Uline, Johnson, James-Ward, & Basom, 2010). In some cases, it has been described as a system of shallow compliance activities, lacking in quality practical activities to prepare future educational leaders (Levine, 2005; National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE], 2010; Perez et al., 2010; SREB, 2005; Wallace Foundation, 2008). Previous literature about the design elements of job-embedded learning is often unclear about the extent to which these practices are associated with effectiveness or impact of preparation as this insight is included as part of discussions/conclusion sections of research reports.[1] The literature does point to the following features in how job-embedded learning is structured:

- **Active engagement** in learning offers authentic field-based opportunities that are scaffolded on a developmental continuum where aspiring school leaders gradually engage in more independent leadership experiences as they progress through the program (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; SREB, 2005).
- **Integration of theory and practice** allows aspiring school leaders to apply their knowledge/skills and helps them grapple with linking theory and practice (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Grossman, 2010).
- **Collaboration with school districts** enables joint ownership of leadership preparation and offers support for candidates to practice essential competencies in the current P-12 context. Handbooks or guidance material, as well as regular interactions among stakeholders, help set expectations and develop processes ensuring a high quality experience (SREB, 2005; Wallace Foundation, 2012).

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[1] Assuming these considerations are "best practices" perhaps overstates a presence of evidence that firmly supports these practices will lead to effective preparation.

- **Ongoing input from expert practitioners** can include intensive guidance from both university-based field supervisors who have supervision expertise and time for frequent formative feedback (SREB, 2005) and site-based mentoring leaders who are expert practitioners with desired leadership skills (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; NCATE, 2010).
- **"Substantial" and "sustained" experiences** that begin early in the preparation program and provide ample time for in-depth learning is important (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Fry et al., 2007; Levine, 2005; SREB, 2005); however, there are not specific details on the ideal duration and, arguably, the quality of the experience is more important than the total hours clocked (Grossman, 2010).
- **Multiple contexts in real-world settings** (including various performance levels, diverse populations, and different locales) provide a range of experiences in solving actual problems in P-12 settings (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Fry et al., 2007; Grossman, 2010; Levine, 2005; NCATE, 2010; SREB, 2005).

Some examples of the collective effort in job-embedded learning include districts scheduling release time for internship activities; developing specific policies for field placements; integrating internship experiences with district- and state-specific professional development programs; and developing procedures to select, prepare, and support site-based mentoring leaders. Preparation programs play an important role in providing training; working with districts to analyze needs; selecting/preparing site-based mentoring leaders; and arranging university-based supervision to evaluate aspiring school leaders' performance (SREB, 2005).

Requisite Skills, Knowledge, and Dispositions for Educational Administrators

Many leadership practices linked to instructional improvement from the recent past are still applicable to current P-12 settings: working with teachers to improve effectiveness; providing resources and professional development; monitoring teacher and student progress; participating in discussions on educational issues; and promoting parental and community involvement in the school (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). Similarly, the skills outlined by Thomson (1993) that span across functional, programmatic, interpersonal, and contextual domains include relevant aspects for contemporary educational administrators. School leaders have historically faced challenging circumstances to meet often-insurmountable demands such as these, but they have come under increasing pressure during the last few decades. They are expected to fulfill a continuously expanding set of roles—visionary change agents leading their team to dramatic improvements, human resource managers recruiting and retaining high-quality staff, small-business executives balancing budgets, front-line building supervisors ensuring safe school climates, and instructional leaders managing teaching quality (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, & Orr, 2007; Hambright & Franco, 2008; Hess & Kelly, 2005; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004). Calls by policy experts and officials for dramatic improvement in student achievement and teacher quality have led to elevated expectations for school leaders to combine their managerial responsibilities with instructional leadership (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 2011; Elmore, 2005).

King-Rice (2010) acknowledges complex multidimensionality of the principal role noting that it, "depends, in part, on their sense of efficacy on particular kinds of tasks and how they allocate their time across daily responsibilities" (p. 2). Relevant skill sets are presumably contextual based on school level, region, urbanity, school size, and school performance status, among many other considerations. Experts have specified what a turnaround principal needs: motivation to achieve, persistence in the face of obstacles, ambitious goal-setting abilities and detailed planning skills (Steiner & Barrett, 2012). Additionally, research from Curry, Pacha, and

Baker (2007), Darling-Hammond et al. (2007), and Fry, Bottoms, O'Neil, and Walker (2007) point to the following expectations of principals:

- **Curriculum**: Serve as curriculum facilitators to assure the curriculum is aligned, implemented and assessed for a coherent educational program across the school; and provide scheduled opportunities for teachers to work on curriculum planning and alignment.
- **Staffing**: Arrange the school schedule for common planning time among staff; arrange for meaningful, sustained professional development that stems from school needs and goals including new teacher mentoring; and employ a well-defined teacher evaluation process for instructional improvement.
- **Instruction**: Foster an atmosphere of "no excuses, no escape" for student learning; understand the need for and encourage the use of differentiated instruction; support/remediate poor performers; and develop a school mission that all students will be prepared to succeed in college and careers.
- **Progress Monitoring**: Use multiple observations (formal and informal) and student achievement data to inform teacher evaluations and track school-wide progress; set assessment expectations/strategies; and guide teachers to use student data on an ongoing basis to identify mastery and deficiencies.
- **Recognition and Rewards**: Celebrate students' academic and positive behavioral successes; use awards and motivations for students (including individualized supports); provide time for staff to problem-solve collaboratively; and value and support every student.
- **School Climate and Culture**: Foster a learning-centered environment based on collegiality and collaboration; acknowledge the teachers' knowledge and abilities; and practice distributed leadership that blurs the traditional lines between administrators and teachers; and maintain support from the school district office staff, community members, and parents.
- **School Improvement:** Use time and resources in innovative ways to meet school improvement goals; lead well-informed change processes; call regular school improvement meetings; and leverage the use of new research and proven practices.

THE ADMINISTRATIVE INTERNSHIP

The field experience, or internship, in educational administration is the primary vehicle for learning. Therefore, it must provide quality opportunities for interns to gain new insights and have hands-on opportunities to experience being a school administrator (Barnett, 2004; Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Cunningham & Sherman, 2008; Orr & Orphanos, 2011; Roach, Smith, & Boutin, 2011; Sherman & Crum, 2009). The administrative internship is considered the capstone experience of the preparation program and occurs when the student can demonstrate applications of the national standards in a real world environment (Hall, 2008; Hines, 2008; Risen & Tripses, 2008), as well as knowledge and skills acquired during their coursework (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007; Erich, Hansford, & Tennet, 2004).

Browne-Ferrigno (2003) states that the administrative internship is a socialization experience that connects administrative interns with practicing administrators in actual settings to create a new community of practice. Conversely, critics have stated the internship is lacking and does not provide administrative interns with quality experiences (Dishman & Redish, 2011; Gaureau, Kufel, & Parks, 2006; Levine, 2005). Levine (2005) criticized the preparation of aspiring principals as disconnected with principal work and that most administration preparation programs range from inadequate to appalling in quality (p. 23). Key features of criticism include

low quality faculty, weak connections between curriculum and practice, and low standards for admission to degree programs (p. 24). Other critics stated the administrative internship is usually no more than an opportunity for interns to log hours and perform menial tasks (Dishman & Redish, 2011; Fry, O'Neil, & Bottoms, 2006; Gray, Fry, Bottoms, & O'Neil, 2007; Levine, 2005;). Fry, Bottoms, and O'Neill (2006) stated interns mostly observed tasks and concluded their internship without a clear understanding of the principal's role. These researchers recommend internships apply current knowledge, concepts, and skills through meaningful, purposeful, and well-designed experiences with trained and accomplished school leaders who model best practices (p. 30). Some researchers even state the internship experiences should be the primary vehicle for learning, with coursework designed around those authentic experiences, not vice versa (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Cunningham & Sherman, 2008; Ehrich, Hansford, & Tennet, 2004).

The administrative internship is not a one-size-fits-all process. Hung (2001) states internship experiences vary across institutions and that some experiences are full-time and grant funded, while others are part-time during hours the intern is not working in their full-time job. The administrative internship is an integral part of an educational administrator preparation program and has lasting effects on candidates' future roles in administration (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Orr, & Cohen, 2007; Thessin & Clayton, 2013). It is the responsibility of the educational administrator preparation program to provide administrative interns with authentic learning opportunities and mutually beneficial intern/supervisor pairings. This necessitates preparation programs collaborate with school districts to design internship experiences that provide interns with the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to step into a leadership role as an administrator (Pounder & Crow, 2005; Thessin & Clayton, 2013).

Browne-Ferrigno and Muth (2004) stated that creating authentic, transformative internship experiences for aspiring administrators, mentoring throughout the preparation process, and offering in-service professional development is crucial to the successful development of educational administrators. Although there are many approaches to the administrative internship, researchers found administrative interns value their internship experiences to prepare them for future leadership roles (Dunaway, Flowers, & Lyons, 2010; Orr, 2011). Exploring the different elements of the administrative internship through the lens of job-embedded learning as a facet of Adult Learning Theory guided this study to understand the journey of the administrative intern as they transition from students to future educational leaders with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to recognize and navigate through problems of practice.

METHODS

This qualitative study utilized two methods for gathering data: semi-structured participant interviews and document analysis. Interview participants were selected from Educational Adminstration Program candidates enrolled in their final capstone internship course of a university. Following existing norms in qualitative research design (Creswell, 2007), twenty candidates: three males and seventeen females completing internships at the elementary, secondary, and central office levels were selected for the interviews representing informants from all locations, including online, where the internship courses were offered.

Document analysis included a theory-guided content analysis and axial coding (Maxwell, 2002) of ten documents including key clinical features and assessments of the field experiences, practicum, and internships used in preparing educational administrators. Each document represented a key assessment completed by participants as partial requirements to completing their degree or certificate program in educational leadership and administration. For each document, aspects analyzed were learning outcomes, the presence or absence of standard-based characteristics, as well as anecdotal notes that justify the absence or presence of each characteristic. Based on insights drawn from the document analysis, the second data source entailed verifying evidence with stakeholders through interviews. The data set developed through

this process also provided a platform for deeper inquiry into the assessments of candidates during their clinical experiences that provided key data on how that they were impacting learning for P-12 students.

Data Analysis

Within the context of Adult Learning Theory, this study is rooted within the overarching epistemology of constructivism, a perspective that focuses on "the meaning making activity of the individual mind" (Crotty, 1998, p.58). Per this perspective, "reality is socially constructed as there is no single, observable reality" (Merriam, 2009, p. 8). This epistemological mindset values everyone's interpretation and description of his/her experiences without critical judgment of his/her perspective (Crotty, 1998). Candidates in the educational administrator preparation program are exposed to courses and clinical practices commonly provided to all candidates; however, their personal values, background experiences, and their schools' cultures play a key role in determining the way in which they situate, interpret, and utilize their experiences.

Parallel to such subjective nature of constructivism, this study employs an interpretive qualitative research approach to address the research questions: 1) What design elements of clinical practice allow candidates to understand problems of practice in educational administration through adaptable, contextualized, and authentic strategies?, 2) In what ways do these elements and measures align with the taxonomy of best practices, theory, and research in assessing candidates and clinical practice?, and 3) How do candidates perceive the effectiveness of these measures in clinical practice to assess their understanding of the problems of practice in educational administration? These questions guided our inquiry as we sought to discover how our candidates "make sense of" knowledge, skills and disposition gained through clinical practice in our preparation program (Merriam, 2009). Such inductive approach to data analysis will help unpack what participants (candidates) value in their "life worlds", resulting in what Guba and Lincoln (2005) call the construction of accumulated knowledge through "sophisticated reconstructions" of participants' experiences (p. 194).

A team of four researchers coded and summarized interview data according to the interview questions and themes that emerged with regard to: 1) assessments that tap knowledge, skills, and dispositions that provide evidence of impact on student learning and the learning environment; and 2) assessments of candidate learning that are unique to the program. Data analysis followed the protocol outlined by Maxwell (2004) to identify ways participants (candidates) account for and "make sense of" their clinical experiences to interpret how "their understanding influences" their perceptions and actions. Following Maxwell's (2005) recommendations to connect the data analysis process to the research questions and theoretical framework, the researchers consistently considered the following factors throughout the data analysis process: (1) "Rich" data, (2) Respondent validation, (3) Intervention, (4) Searching for discrepant evidence and negative cases, and (5) Triangulation concerning the validity of research findings.

Trustworthiness

This research adopted multiple practices to ensure trustworthiness in qualitative research consistent with recommended aspects including credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Morrow, 2005). To ensure credibility, multiple methods of triangulation and multiple analysts corroborated findings (Creswell, 1998); it also allowed us to unpack the topic from various angles. Specific triangulation methods utilized included peer review, characterizing researcher bias prior to data collection, and rich, thick descriptions (Creswell, 2007). The rich descriptions provided by participants allowed findings to be applied in other contexts, as appropriate; these practices in transferability are consistent with standard approaches (Creswell, 1998). Additionally, the audit trails we created helped to establish a

framework by which others could produce similar results in repeated studies and are key functions of dependability and confirmability (Merriam, 2009; Morrow, 2005).

FINDINGS

Through the examination of assessments and interviews, as well as a rigorous process of qualitative analysis, two key themes emerged from the interviews and document analysis that directly tied to the research questions in this study.

First, candidates emphasized the importance of the site supervisor/mentor and intern relationship. School-based mentors were frequently cited as critical and essential to a high-quality clinical experience, even in smaller course projects. Students described feeling a lack of interaction with some mentors as a blockade to authentic feedback and experiences. This finding ties directly to the first research question regarding the candidates' ability to identify problems of practice, and the second research question, which centered on tying best practices to internship experiences.

Second, the mutual expectations for assessments in terms of requirements and evaluation were key to the impact of the assessments. In addition to these two themes, there was clear and immediate response by the educational administrator preparation program to understand more about the results of the document analysis and the feedback of students. This finding emerged from research question three, which focused on the candidates' ability to assess the effectiveness of utilizing taxonomies of best practices in clinical practice to lead to better understandings of problems of practice in educational administration.

Relationship and Interactions with Site-Based Mentors

Throughout the interviews, most participants described valuable interactions they had with site-based mentors.[2] This section details the nature of relationships between participants and site-based mentors, the learning experiences that occur, and insights about how the program can improve. Understanding the role that site-based mentors play is critical; as one individual stated, "They are going to set the stage to what you actually get to do or not get to do…. They are the gatekeeper of having all of these experiences." This finding is deeply rooted in adult learning theory (Knowles, 1980), as participants were internally motivated to learn, and took a problem-centered approach to clinical practice experiences due to the nature of their relationship with their site-based mentor.

Nature of Relationship. In many cases, the site-based mentor is at the participants' current school of employment. Advantages to this are that the participant has existing rapport with administrators and teachers as well as familiarity with the context. One participant described being able to, "do a whole lot more because I already have those relationships." A few participants shared how their site-based mentor was mentoring them for anticipated openings for assistant principal positions. Participants working with a site-based mentor they already knew reported that they deepened existing relationships and anticipated continuing to seek advice from the site-based mentor. As a candidate shared, "it is nice to have somebody who is mentoring me professionally, that's looking out for me."

In the situation where the participant is completing clinical practice with a site-based mentor he/she is unfamiliar with, there is reluctance for the participant to take on leadership roles without having built trust with the administrators or teachers at the school. On the other hand, a few participants discussed the importance of having mentors from various schools as reflected in the following statement: "I've made it a point to have different mentors of different personalities,

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[2] In this paper, site-based mentors refers to practicing school leaders (such as principals, assistant principals, or district leaders) who offer guidance to participants during their culminating internship experiences.

because I've wanted to see how each person handled different situations." Another participant discussed the value in having many site-based mentors to establish a network of support.[3]

Many candidates spoke about the value of site-based mentors who were recent graduates of administrator preparation programs. Those who completed the program at the same university had particularly useful insight about the program design and coursework. Site-based mentors who recently graduated programs at another university offer similar advantages to the knowledge base and their clinical practice experiences. As one participant stated, "[My site-based mentor] is just so phenomenal because she just went through the process of the internship."

Learning Experiences with Site-Based Mentors. Participants detailed various experiences they had with site-based mentors to learn valuable school leadership skills. Many participants appreciated being permitted to take leadership with flexibility in decision-making. In some cases, the site-based mentor was nearby to guide and advise participants; in other instances, the site-based mentor was unavailable forcing participants into "baptism by fire," as one participant described it. Participants seemed particularly appreciative of site-based mentors who were invested in them and tried to expose them to as much as possible. A few participants talked about how their site-based mentor helped them apply what they were learning in class as well as provide early experiences for information they later learned in coursework. The following statements capture this unidirectional learning experience: "You can talk to [the site-based mentor] about it to see if you're applying what you learned just so they can keep you on the track;" and "We talked about things in class and I saw them in practice in our building…. Having someone model the things that I was learning in my classes was very helpful."

Participants described that the clinical practice is relatively open-ended, but that their site-based mentor helped them learn specific school administrator skills. Two participants specifically described how their site-based mentor helped them understand how to deal with discipline. One participant shared that he/she learned the importance of gently delivering observation feedback after seeing the harsh approach of his/her site-based mentor. Others emphasize the value in attending administrator meetings to learn how to engage with other administrators.

Regardless of the skill that participants were learning, feedback and support facilitated participants' growth as school administrators. One participant described debrief sessions with his/her site-based mentor stating, "He did not sugarcoat anything for me. When I did mess up, he wasn't mean about it, but he certainly called me on it. I think that's important.... He gave me feedback constantly." Other participants shared how their site-based mentors were very encouraging.

Addressing Existing Challenges with Site-Based Leaders. Some of the data that emerged from the interviews pointed to existing challenges as well as recommendations for improvement. A few participants described frustration about their site-based mentor not knowing the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) standards. Some site-based mentors were also unaware of the experiences participants should have during clinical practice. One participant suggested the program offer more guidelines for site-based mentors about what participants need to be exposed to. In other cases, site-based mentors were not able to afford participants much attention given other demands for their time. As one participant stated, "That's a key component is the [site-based mentor] is engaged in and really involved and wants to lead." As a key element of adult learning theory, (Knowles et. al, 1998) adult learners need to know what is expected of them and what they must learn, preferably at the beginning of a course (p. 68).

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[3] Related themes that emerged from these data point to participants seeing value in clinical practice in different settings (including various school levels, different districts, schools of different performance levels, and district offices) and various points of time in the school year. This finding is beyond the scope of this paper, but will be explored further in forthcoming articles.

Perceptions of Key Assessments

Participants expressed their perceptions about the key assessments for each course in their administrator preparation program, along with the expectations and feedback provided by their course instructors. This section outlines those descriptions, as well as participants' feelings and reactions to those elements of the program. Understanding how participants perceive the expectations of and the assessments themselves will lead to a better conception of the role they play in the overall degree or certificate programs, which is a foundational element of adult learning theory, as previously stated.

As students complete key assessments in each course to synthesize and demonstrate the knowledge and skills gained during the course, participants shared their thoughts about each key assessment and how they effected their experiences. Out of the ten key assessments, three were discussed during many participant interviews. The first of these assessments, addressed by nearly every participant in the study, was the mock Individualized Education Plan (IEP) assignment students completed in the Authentic School Law course. Many participants stated this assessment was useful to building their knowledge of school law from a leadership standpoint. One participant shared:

> Developing the IEP . . . was very, very useful working as a team and coming up with the different things because every school district does handle it differently and looking at it from the eyes of an administrator is a little bit different.

Another participant shared that the IEP assessment was enlightening and a few participants described it as "eye opening." Conversely, for participants certified in special education, the assignment was not as valuable. For example, one participant stated, "I've done IEP's even when I was student teaching, so for me, 15 years of IEP's, I'm like, I know what their purpose is." Another said, "I don't know that that was helpful to me because I've done probably a hundred." These participants also felt like they completed most the work for the group assessment. One participant, an individual not certified in special education, echoed these feelings by describing her experience with this assessment with having someone certified in special education in her group:

> We had a special ed teacher in each group, and unfortunately because she had the knowledge base that was necessary to complete the project, she ended up doing the majority of the work, and I felt that was really unfair.

Although perceptions of the Applied School Law mock IEP assessment varied, most participants expressed gratitude for the knowledge gained in the course. "School law is . . . a class that will definitely save my life if I'm practicing in the field."

The second key assessment that greatly influenced participants was the curriculum and instructional analysis assessment for the Instructional Needs Analysis course. For this assessment, students were asked to take a piece of the written curriculum, conduct a pre-conference with a teacher who would teach it, observe the teacher teaching the content, and then conduct a post-conference with the teacher and provide feedback. Many participants described this assignment as the most helpful in preparation to become an educational administrator. One participant summed up what many participants stated by saying:

> It gave me that experience of having to do it with someone. Even though I knew the person, it developed a more intimate relationship and builds on what we already had as colleagues working together. That took me to a different level. It builds trust as well if you do it correctly, so I could see how that would be beneficial as an instructional leader in the building.

Many participants expressed this assessment helped them further understand instructional problems of practice; specifically, it served as a way for them to help teachers, as well as themselves, identify gaps between the written, taught, and tested curricula.

The third assessment discussed by most of the participants was a Vision power point presentation during the Site-Based Leadership course where they, as educational administrators, communicated a vision to teachers and staff members, as well as the steps they believed would help them achieve that vision. Some participants designed a presentation for the first faculty meeting, while others designed a Vision power point presentation for an educational program, such as community outreach or after school programs. Participants appreciated the flexibility of the assessment and that they could choose to frame their vision around their interests. When reflecting upon this assessment, one participant stated, "It made me think of what type of leader I wanted to be."

Expectations and Feedback from Instructors. Expectations for key assessments were primarily expressed to students through the syllabus for each course. In general, when participants expressed negative feelings about the expectations for a course or assessment, it was about the Mock IEP assessment. Many participants felt it was geared more toward special education and that the course did not balance the content with school law that does not concern special education services. Additionally, a few of the participants felt the expectations were too high and the workload was too overwhelming in the school law course. Other concerns about the instructor's expectations identified by students were that the instructor did not adhere to what was in the syllabus, or that the instructor used a syllabus from a previous semester, leaving students confused about when course assignments were due.

Throughout the participant interviews, it became clear that instructor feedback was valuable, as is reflected in the principals of job-embedded learning. Whether participants expressed satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the feedback provided or the absence of feedback, it was a common theme discussed when they described the key assessments. Most participants would tie their statements about instructor feedback to specific instructors, while others expressed more generalized feelings about feedback provided throughout the coursework. Overall, statements about instructor feedback were positive. When one participant questioned her instructor about a grade she received on an assignment, she said:

> She worked through it with me, and she gave me some really good feedback and suggestions. That was really helpful because I can get an A in the class, but it's not going to help me if I don't understand where I need to go.

Negative feelings regarding instructor feedback centered on instructors who did not provide timely feedback, or did not provide feedback at all; however, those cases were few and isolated to specific instructors. Even in cases where students received an A in the course, participants expressed the need for instructor feedback on assignments to help them develop their knowledge and skills. "I feel like most of the assignments were very good . . . but there were some where feedback was given so late that I didn't feel like I was fully able to . . . get the most out of the assignment."

Response by Leadership Preparation Program

As the accreditation efforts forged through this innovative design help programs move from compliance to improvement, it was helpful to understand what changes the leadership preparation program discussed because of this study, and other data that informed the accreditation work, grounded in the foundations of adult learning theory and job-embedded learning. Two specific areas arose because of these findings. First, faculty discussed inter-rater reliability and implementation of assessment rubrics and created an ongoing review of syllabi and key assessments to consider best practices in the field and the voice of students. Second, faculty

discussed ways to improve the alignment across sites of internship mentor/mentee matching and preparation. While each of these were carefully considered and appropriate changes made, it is important to note that no changes were made solely because of the interviews in this study due to the low N; however, the findings did inform a deeper investigation into issues raised.

Participants raised concerns about the clarity and consistency of rubrics used for key assessments, as well as the assignment descriptions. In response, faculty took the time to place all courses on a review cycle that includes reviewing the syllabus, vetting assessment instructions with both faculty and students to ensure clarity, and updating assessment rubrics to allow for better translation between ELCC standards and the university grading system. The process resulted in an overall curriculum audit that also highlighted some important voids, as well as overlap that the program is beginning to address.

The second immediate response dealt with inconsistency of internship experiences reported by students particularly as it related to mentor/mentee relationships. The program began to convene all internship university-based instructors to discuss how to improve the communication to mentors, as well as to improve the placement process. This resulted in a more elongated internship application that required students to communicate desired placement and objectives. Additionally, reflective practice readings were incorporated, as were one to one conversations between interns and their instructors prior to entering the placement. These served to clarify expectations and brainstorm how to communicate through challenges. Although several offers were made to provide training to site-based mentors, it was declined by several districts due to a lack of time for their administrators therefore the program must rely on written communication such as the internship handbook.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Findings revealed in this study led to several recommendations for practice at both the school district and university levels. It is important for universities and school districts to develop strong relationships as administrative interns are paired with experienced mentors. Because of this study, the university now requires an elongated internship application; however, the same effort must be given to recruiting, training, and supporting mentors to lead to more consistent internship outcomes. Additionally, based upon experiences and perceptions described by participants in this study, strong lines of communication between the university and the intern and mentor must be established to address the needs and expectations of all parties involved, thus leading to a more successful internship experience for all stakeholders.

Further research is needed in educational leadership preparation at the university level. As ambiguity existed in the interpretation and utilization of key assessments in this study, the researchers recommend the development of quantitative methods to measure how these assessments are interpreted and utilized. This measure may lead to a more targeted approach to improving these assessments. Additionally, further research is recommended to collect data from participating mentors during and following the internship. Furthermore, studying intern and mentor pairs may lead to a more comprehensive understanding of how key assessments are used during the internship, as well as how these assessments could be approved upon from the mentor's perspective.

CONCLUSION

At the apex of reform efforts are a plethora of literature that call for change in educator preparation (AACTE [American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education], 2011). Specific focus is on assuring high quality clinical experiences and assessments that prepare educators for their expanded professional and leadership roles. Findings add to the expanding body of literature on preparing leaders who are knowledgeable, supported, and confident to enter leadership roles in this ever-changing educational climate. For a more holistic understanding of what is needed to build and sustain successful schools, teachers, educational administrators, and school counselors

must be able to work together to assess student needs, design appropriate curriculum to meet those needs and create the learning environment that blends the right conditions for learning (Grossman, 2010; Levine, 2005; The Wallace Foundation, 2008). This study provided one lens through which to begin to understand the clinical experiences and how best to prepare educators. Not only was it important to understand the intended design of clinical experiences and assessment, but also it was critical to solicit feedback on the experiences of candidates to identify areas of needed improvement. This study represents a step in the cycle of continuous improvement including immediate steps to rethink the clarity around assessment expectations and the strategic placement of candidates with site-based mentors. Various related themes that emerged from this study will also enable further inquiry into topics such as the placement settings of clinical practice and additional mechanisms for enhanced feedback.

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