

# HOW PRINCIPALS LEARN TO LEAD: THE COMPARATIVE INFLUENCE OF ON-THE-JOB EXPERIENCES, ADMINISTRATOR CREDENTIAL PROGRAMS, AND THE ISLLC STANDARDS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF LEADERSHIP EXPERTISE AMONG URBAN PUBLIC SCHOOL PRINCIPALS\*

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## Abstract

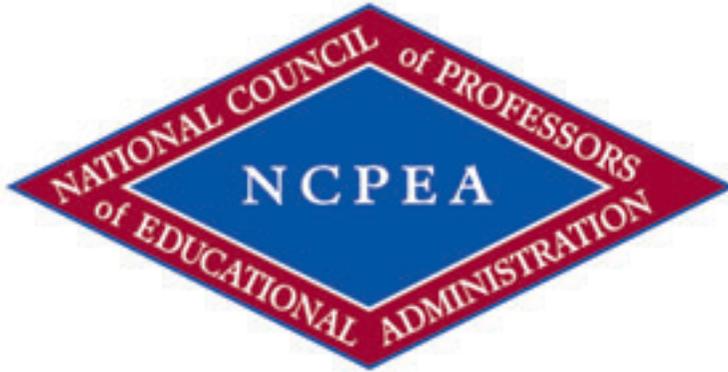
The purpose of this study was to examine the comparative influence of college administrator credential programs, on-the-job experiences, and the ISLLC Standards in the development of leadership expertise among urban public school principals. An exploratory, ex-post-facto research design used both quantitative and qualitative approaches. A survey of 101 randomly selected urban school principals from 25 of America's largest metropolitan school districts was given, followed by telephone interviews with a subset of 20 randomly selected survey participants. Data were analyzed through the use of inferential and descriptive statistics and descriptive narratives. On-the-job experiences were significantly more important in developing leadership expertise than college credential programs on each of 41 ISLLC-based learning tasks. However, college credential programs are also important sources of leadership development. Several significant differences were found between comparative ratings of learning tasks by subgroups (experience, gender, school type). Respondents ranked 78% of the ISLLC Standards as very important to the field of school leadership. Interview subjects expressed concern about lack of preparation in budgeting, data analysis, teacher evaluation, and change management.

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## 2 INTRODUCTION

What school leaders do and the impact of their behaviors on teaching and learning has been the subject of scholarly inquiry for decades (Murphy, 1990; Tyack & Hansot, 1982), while the magnitude of the principal's role in contemporary school reform efforts has become a topic of great interest by policy makers, scholars, and practitioners (Hess & Kelly, 2005). New policy initiatives such as *Race To the Top* underscore on the importance of the principal's role in promoting school reforms and, subsequently, increased student achievement. According to United States Department of Education Secretary, Arne Duncan (2010, p.1), *Race to the Top* "is driving a deep rethinking of education" and is pushing for "all elements of the education system to get better...simultaneously." In his remarks to the National Education Association Duncan (2009, p. 4) further stated that, "Great principals lead talented instructional teams that drive student performance and close achievement gaps...But if they're not up to the job, they need to go." In addition to holding principals accountable for student achievement, *Race to the Top* also underscores a significant commitment by the Department of Education to provide funding support for effective principal preparation and professional development programs.

Recent analyses regarding programs and practices that prepare school leaders have illuminated both promising developments and concerns regarding the efficacy, quality, and relevance of principal preparation programs as well as the principals produced by them. To date, the "scorecard" is mixed. Critics point to the dismal state of principal preparation programs in America, while proponents point to important advances in the professional knowledge base, policy development, and local practices in school leadership (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2006; Murphy & Vriesenga, 2006; Williams, Kirst, & Haertel, 2005).

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.ncpeapublications.org/latest-issue-ijelp.html>

Some critics have concluded that most principal preparation programs are simply not very good at producing leaders who can address the increasingly complex challenges and problems faced by America's public schools today, and especially those faced by schools in low income, urban communities (Elmore, 2000; Hess & Kelly, 2005; Levine, 2005). According to Fry, O'Neill, and Bottoms (2006, p. 7), "It is difficult to distinguish most of the programs of today from those of the preceding generation."

School district superintendents have expressed similar concerns. In a survey of 853 superintendents, Farkas, Johnson, Duffett, Folen, and Foley (2001) found that ninety-two percent believed that administrator credential programs are out of touch and ineffective. Even school principals generally agree that the "factors that add the greatest value to their success [as leaders] are on-the-job experiences" (Usdan, McCloud, & Podmostko, 2000, p. 1).

In contrast to such negative accounts is growing evidence that educational leadership is a profession in transition, moving toward more robust approaches to leadership preparation (e.g., standards-based principal preparation programs, programs designed to reform underperforming urban schools, and accountability measures to foster leadership effectiveness). However, while the need for highly effective school principals is indisputable, understanding how such principals are developed is imperative if the profession is to effectively meet the complex needs of 21<sup>st</sup> Century schools and students.

In this study, we draw upon the standards of professional practice established by the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium to examine, a) how urban school principals develop leadership expertise, b) the comparative importance of administrator credential programs and on-the-job experiences as sources of leadership knowledge and skill development and, c) the relative importance of the ISLLC standards to urban principals and their impact on leadership development.

### 3 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

#### 3.1 School Leadership Development Under Fire

The increased attention on school leadership and its potential to facilitate powerful teaching and learning (Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Marzano, Waters, & McNaulty, 2005); Seashore Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010) has stimulated policy makers, researchers, credential program faculty, practitioners, non-profit agencies, and foundations to establish more relevant, rigorous, and innovative professional training programs and performance standards (e.g., the Wallace Foundation, USDE Leadership Development Grants, ISLLC 2008, etc.). In some states, like California, legislative efforts to tap into the pool of administrative talent from non-public school, private, and public employment sectors have resulted in alternative pathways for administrative licensure—such as a testing only option, relaxed credential requirements for charter school principals, credentialing offered through local education agencies and professional associations, and the inclusion of non-profit credential providers such as New Leaders for New Schools (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007; Hale & Moorman, 2003; Hamilton, Stecher, & Yuan, 2009; Levin, 2005; Murphy, 2003). To date, little empirical evidence points to the comparative advantage of either alternative or traditional credential programs in preparing effective principals. According to Hess and Kelly (2005, p.175), the "world of principal preparation shows little evidence that the whirlwind of initiatives and new programs has yielded much in the way of substantive change." The authors maintain that with the exception of New Leaders for New Schools (NLNS) and the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), most programs depicted as innovative or alternative have simply "continued conventional practices repackaged under the mantle of reform" (p. 175).

Nevertheless, at the heart of the reformists' agenda are several core competencies deemed essential to effective instructional leadership (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2007; Hallinger, 1992; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; ISLLC, 1996; Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Marks & Printy, 2003; Murphy, 2003; Silins, Mulford, & Zarins, 2002). Stanford professor, Larry Cuban (2004), maintains that urban principals and the students they serve often face stiffer challenges politically, socially, and economically than their more affluent suburban counterparts. According to Cuban, the most successful urban principals share four common attributes, a) a refusal to accept low expectations, b) a focus on instructional excellence, c) an

insistence on providing a challenging curriculum, and d) the ability to rally broad support politically.

Although much has been written about the characteristics of effective urban principals the activities and settings through which they acquire leadership skills are not well understood. According to Murphy (2003, p. 30), “Leadership is a complex and context-dependent activity. To attempt to envelop the concept with a definitive list of indicators is a fool’s errand.” Whereas the traditional research orientation has emphasized leadership program inputs (e.g., resources, program structure, curriculum design), many scholars maintain that a more comprehensive orientation would place a stronger emphasis on the examination of program throughputs (e.g., learning processes and activities) and their outcomes (Fry, O’Neill, & Bottoms, 2006; Hale & Moorman, 2003; McGough, 2002; Murphy & Vriesenga, 2006).

Often, assessments of principal preparation programs have less to do with what principals *do* (and how well) once employed in their new leadership assignments than the curricular and structural characteristics of the credential programs themselves (Elmore, 2000; Hess & Kelly, 2005; Orr, 2003;). Some critics assert that too many preparation programs fail to teach principals how to, a) be instructional, community, and visionary leaders, b), effectively meet the needs of diverse learners, or c) use multiple sources of data to diagnose and repair ineffective educational systems and practices, or d) provide comprehensive and hands-on field experiences (Hess & Kelly, 2005, Usdan, McCloud, & Podmostko, 2000). Arthur Levine (2005) argued that if indeed “the proof was in the pudding,” most principal preparation programs in American would fail (and have failed) miserably. Usdan, et al., (2000, p. 2) states that “...current principals find very little in their professional preparation or ongoing professional development to equip them for new roles.”

Concerns like these underscore an important question that continues to challenge the field: what do urban principals perceive to be the most influential venue for developing leadership expertise, the job or administrative credential programs? In response to this, we focused our investigation on the perceptions of urban principals to three sub-questions:

1. How do urban principals develop leadership expertise?
2. How important (comparatively) are on-the-job experiences and administrative credential programs in the development of leadership expertise among urban principals (and with what skills)?
3. How important are the 1996 ISLLC Standards for School Leaders in the development of leadership expertise among urban principals?

We believe that the answers to these questions must be framed within the larger policy context of principal preparation and professional development in America—a context that has been profoundly shaped by the ISLLC Standards for School Leaders.

### 3.2 The National Standards for Administrative Practice

In response to growing pressures to reform the quality of America’s schools and their leaders, in 1994 the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) commissioned the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) to shape and focus the development of school leaders around a set of empirically grounded principles and best practices. The resulting document (i.e., the ISLLC Standards for School Leaders) subsequently became the “gold standard” which most states now use to shape K-12 administrator credentialing requirements and performance criteria (Murphy, 2003, Usdan, et al., 2000). For over 12 years the standards remained intact. Then, in 2008 the standards were revised to strengthen their alignment with the evolving educational and leadership needs of 21<sup>st</sup> Century schools. Nevertheless, the original six standards have had a growing influence on programs that prepare school leaders. It is our position that the analysis of how school leaders develop leadership expertise must recognize the broad and enduring influence of the ISLLC Standards, and particularly those developed in 1996 (e.g., the revised version will require more time to penetrate the field).

The 1996 ISLLC Standards are organized into three domains, six conceptual categories, and 184 supporting concepts—43 (23%) that fall within the domain of *knowledge*, 44 (24%) that fall within the domain of *dispositions*, and 97 (53%) that fall within the domain of *performances* (ISLLC, 1996). Importantly, the ISLLC Standards are widely regarded as empirically sound and have garnered broad support from policy

makers, scholars, and practitioners. As such, they provide a strong framework for examining the mechanisms and contexts that influence the acquisition of leadership expertise (Murphy, 2003; Usdan, et al., 2000).

### 3.3 Experiential Learning and Principal Development

“Most of what I learned about leadership, I learned on the job.” This is a statement often heard from veteran school administrators, but how accurate is it? According to ninety-eight percent of the principals who responded to a nationally distributed survey by Hess & Kelly (2005), learning on the job was far more important in the development of leadership skills than graduate school coursework. That people learn about (and from) their jobs while performing them is not a new idea. It is common knowledge among those who work with adult learners that formal classroom instruction is no substitute for the real world of work in the development of professional expertise (Bottoms & O’Neill, 2001; Young, 2002). Scholars have studied experiential learning, situated cognition, job-embedded learning, and transformative learning in the workplace for years (Fenwick, 2003; Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Mezirow, 1991). In the business sector, leadership development that occurs in the context of ongoing work activities and tied to strategic organizational initiatives is now considered state of the art (Felstead, Fuller, Jewson, & Unwin, 2009). However, this is not commonly the case in education (Hess & Kelly, 2005). In fact, there is little research on how on-the-job experiences can be used as a purposeful and structured professional development tool for school leaders, or how they can stimulate transformative learning (i.e., experiences that when combined with deep self reflection and social discourse challenge deeply held assumptions, values, and beliefs—thus facilitating learning and new knowledge structures) (Fenwick, 2003; Mezirow, 1991). These are important issues since educators rely on job-embedded learning to improve instructional practices and leadership skills, but often without full recognition of what they are doing (Wood & Killian, 1998). As a result, learning on the job is often a tacit rather than explicit process and may rely more on serendipitous events than deliberately structured activities and carefully designed evaluative processes (Wood & McQuarrie, 1999).

## 4 A Rationale for Comparing the Influence of On-the-Job Experiences and Graduate Credential

### 4.1 Programs in the Development of Leadership Expertise

A deeper understanding of the comparative influence of on-the-job experiences and graduate credential programs in the development of leadership expertise is important for several reasons:

1. Since approximately 90% of all administrators in the United States are certified through graduate school coursework, the efficacy of such programs is clearly an important issue. If it is true that for most school leaders on-the-job experiences are more important than graduate coursework in the development of leadership skills, then the relevance, design, and conduct of graduate programs (as well as the costs) are indeed cause for deep concern (Hess & Kelly, 2005; Levine, 2005; Murphy, 2006; Young, 2002).
2. In administrator credential programs across the country, field experiences and practicum activities have become central components of the curriculum. However, their design, rigor, duration, and quality vary widely. Critics note that in far too many credential programs such activities are episodic, decontextualized, not comprehensive, and poorly supervised (Hess & Kelly, 2005; Levine, 2007). As a result, candidates often receive fragmented and often inchoate perspectives about administrative roles, responsibilities, and problem solving scenarios. A deeper understanding of how job-related experiences shape and influence leadership expertise would be of great value to those who design and supervise field-based activities (Bottoms & O’Neill, 2001; Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005; Hale & Moorman, 2003).
3. Relatively little is known about how the types of professional experiences common to school leaders influence and/or stimulate transformative learning, cognitive skills, and the development of leadership skills. A deeper understanding of how workplace cognition influences leadership development is important for researchers and university faculty as well as district office administrators who are responsible

for the supervision, development, and evaluation of school principals (Borg, 2006; Hale & Moorman, 2003; Mezirow, 1991; Usdan, McCloud, & Podmostko, 2000).

4. A more fulsome understanding of how social context can influence leadership development would allow principal developers, mentors, and supervisors to more effectively align the characteristics of leadership candidates with the needs of particular schools, address the developmental learning needs of school leadership candidates, and enhance the pace of urban school reform efforts.

## 5 METHODOLOGY

### 5.1 Overview of the Study

While we recognize that the majority of American school districts are located in various suburban or rural environments, the intense scrutiny and concern levied by policy makers and scholars compelled us to limit our sample to urban districts exclusively.

To examine our three research questions, we developed an exploratory, ex post facto study that combined an online survey (see Appendix A) and follow-up telephone interviews with a randomly selected group of American urban school principals (Creswell, 2007). The survey portion of our study was completed in the autumn of 2008 and the follow-up interviews were completed in the spring of 2009. Survey items were derived from the 1996 ISLLC Standards, while interviews were conducted with a sub-sample of randomly selected survey participants using a standardized open-ended interview approach (Patton, 1990).

### 5.2 Sample Selection: Procedures and Participants

For the survey we randomly selected 200 principals from the largest K-12 school districts in 25 of America's largest metropolitan areas as identified by the US Census Bureau County and City Data Book (2005). The calculation of sample size was based on an estimated response rate of 50%. The population proportion was set at a 95% confidence level and a 10% confidence interval. By using the most conservative estimates for  $p$  and  $q$  (i.e., .50 and  $1 - .50$ ), the minimum sample size required was 96 (Hamilton, 1996). A minimum of 192 surveys needed to be distributed to attain an estimated return rate of 50%. An additional eight surveys were distributed to provide a margin of safety should the return rate fail to reach 50% (surveys were *distributed* via an email link to Survey Monkey, an online survey service). Invitations to participate (or to decline to participate) in the study were sent via email to each principal in our sample of eligible schools. The survey design and distribution procedures were patterned after the *Tailored Design Method* by Dillman, Christian, and Smyth (2008).

Using a stratified random sample selection process, eight schools from each large urban district were selected in groups proportionate to the number of elementary schools (grades K-6), middle schools (grades 6-9), and high schools (grades 9-12) in that district. To provide a more parsimonious distinction between elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools we excluded all other grade level configurations from our population sample (e.g., K-8 or 6-12, etc.). To be eligible for participation in our study, each school needed to have a designated principal or a licensed administrator who served in an equivalent role.

#### *Response Rate*

A total of 104 (52%) surveys were returned. Three incomplete surveys were removed from the final sample. One hundred and one (101) completed surveys were used in our final analysis, which represented 50.5% of the surveys distributed. Sixty-four percent of usable responses came from elementary principals, 13% from middle school respondents, and 23% from high school respondents. Because our analysis did not account for non-response errors, particular subgroup survey responses may over or under-represented.

### 5.3 Instrumentation

Quantitative data were derived through the implementation and analysis of a two-part online survey (see Appendix A). In part one, respondents provided descriptive information about their gender, age, years of

leadership experience, graduate training, type of school/workplace, highest academic degree, and school demographic data. There were 12 items in part one. Part two consisted of 41-items constructed from the 184 indicators of effective leadership practice contained in the six ISLLC standards (1996). The key purpose was to assess how and where principals acquired the leadership competencies contained in the standards. Because a survey with 184 items would be excessively lengthy, we organized the indicators around common themes and related concepts to produce a more manageable set of 41 items.

By squeezing and combining the 184 ISLLC statements into a more manageable format, we ran the risk of altering or blurring the meaning of each statement and its key terms. We attempted to reduce such problems by, a) adhering closely to the language in the ISLLC standards, b) clustering concepts only within each standard (thereby maintaining the integrity of the standard), and c) pilot testing the survey with professors and practicing principals.

Rather than posing items as questions, we wrote them as *learning tasks*. For example, the first item on the survey was written as *Task 1: Learning how to develop and implement a long-term strategic plan for your school*. This corresponded to language in the knowledge and skills subsections of ISLLC Standard 1 (e.g., "...developing and implementing strategic plans" and "...an implementation plan is developed"). The concept of "long term" was added upon the advice of pilot-test subjects. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of their "administrative credential program in developing this skill" and the importance of their "on-the-job experiences in developing this skill." Each of the 41 items was crafted using this method.

Early drafts of the survey were piloted with 10 educational administration faculty members and 10 practicing principals. Subsequent revisions and refinements were made based on their feedback. In cases where the ISLLC Standards have been used as the basis for administrator assessment instruments, the psychometric properties have been consistently strong. The recent development of the Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED) is an example of this (Porter, Goldring, Murphy, Elliott, & Cravens, 2006). Also, the widespread adoption of the ISLLC Standards by state credentialing and accreditation agencies underscores its prominence as a framework for administrator licensure in this country (Murphy, 2003). As a result we did not conduct independent tests for validity or reliability. However, we recognize that the ability to generalize the findings of our study would be strengthened by such testing.

For each of the 41 learning tasks, respondents were asked to choose from a five point Likert-type scale to rate two sub-items, a) the importance of their administrative credential program in the development of leadership expertise on that task, and b) the importance of on-the-job experiences in the development of leadership expertise on that task. The Likert scale choices included "unimportant," "slightly important," "moderately important," "important," and "very important." To assess the impact of the ISLLC standards on the field, respondents were also asked to rate the overall importance of each learning task to effective school leadership on a scale of zero (0 = unimportant) to one (1 = very important). Choice options were provided in increments of .10.

## 5.4 Survey Data Analysis

### Subgroups

Statistical analyses were conducted for four subgroups identified from part I of our survey, 1) years of experience as a principal, 2) gender, and 3) school type. These three factors are especially prominent in the literature on leadership development (Paloniemi, 2006; Ruderman & Ohlott, 2002; Van Velsen & Guthrie, 1998). Following is more descriptive rationale for focusing our analysis on these variables.

1. Years of Experience. What principals learn on the job, and how, appears to be influenced by their level of experience. To assess this, we compared responses from principals who had one year of experience (as principals) with those who had ten years. As principals gain experience, they draw from an increasingly sophisticated reservoir of mental images, schemas, self-reflections, problem solutions, philosophical perspectives, and worldviews. In addition, we wanted to explore how experience influences principal perceptions of what they learned from their credential programs and on the job (Davis & Davis, 2003; Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986). Finally, we assumed that a principal's exposure to the 1996 ISLLC standards would be mitigated by his/her years of experience on the job (e.g., more experienced principals were less likely to have participated

in ISLLC based credential programs than less experienced principals). We acknowledge that there may be good arguments in support of other comparisons (e.g., 3 years vs. 5 or more years, or less than 5 years vs. 6 or more years, etc.). However, we know of no empirical rationale for choosing one over the other. Our goal in comparing principals with one year and ten years of experience was to ensure sufficient variation in experience to tease out the potential influences of the ISLLC standards, proximity to graduate school experiences, and the job itself.

2. Gender. As with experience, a strong empirical rationale exists for studying the role of gender in leadership development and learning among school principals. According to Owens (1995, p. 138), "...gender is the most influential factor in determining one's view of the world and how one responds to what is perceived." Ruderman & Ohlott (2002) maintain that in organizations men are exposed to more significant leadership opportunities than women. Although gender has little impact on leadership effectiveness, it may influence leadership style and behavior (Hopkins, O'Neil, Passarelli, & Bilimoria, 2008).

3. School Type. What leaders do, how they learn, and what they learn can be influenced by different task environments (Daft, 2001). Differences in elementary and secondary school principal roles and responsibilities, behaviors, and leadership styles have been well documented (Davis, 1998). Our goal was to examine the influence of school level on leadership development.

#### *Statistical Tests*

A variety of statistical tests were used to analyze both whole-group and sub-group responses to survey items. First, demographic information was captured using totals, means, frequencies, percentages, and rankings. Second, to assess whole-group differences in responses to credential program and on-the-job response categories, we used a one-way analysis of variance and a principal component factor analysis was used to reduce and cluster the 41 learning tasks around key themes (factors). The results of the factor analysis were particularly useful in helping us to better understand patterns and interrelated features of the ISLLC tasks and their relative importance to principals. Third, learning task responses between sub-groups (e.g., experience levels, gender, school types, credential program types) were compared using an independent samples t-test. For all tests, p values were set at  $p \leq .05$ .

Respondents also rated the importance of each learning task to the field of educational administration using a fractional scale of 0 to 1.0 (e.g., 0 = unimportant, 1.0 = very important). First, we ranked the top and bottom learning task ratings for all respondents and each sub-group. Second, a one-way ANOVA was used to compare mean task ratings between subgroups ( $p \leq .05$ ). For the sake of economy, we reported only the five highest and lowest rated tasks.

## **5.5 Follow Up Interviews**

Follow up telephone interviews were held with 20 principals randomly selected from the 101 survey respondents. Interviewees consisted of 16 female and four male principals from 14 elementary schools and six secondary schools within the following metropolitan areas: Baltimore (2), Cincinnati (1), Cleveland (2), Dallas (2), Detroit (1), Los Angeles (2), Miami-Dade (1), Phoenix (1), Pittsburgh (4), Riverside (2), San Francisco (1), New York (1).

Each phone interview took twenty to thirty minutes and included seven questions designed to prompt self-reflection, emotional content, and descriptive narratives. Using a semi-structured approach, the interviewer encouraged respondents to expand upon each question (e.g., allow it to trigger deep feelings, related experiences, and the construction of personal meaning). Although the interviewer asked the same questions of each subject and took detailed notes of the responses, the interviews were conducted in a conversational manner to provide flexibility for unstructured follow-up probes and inquiries. The seven questions included:

1. What on-the-job experiences as an administrator have been most important in helping you develop your leadership skills?
2. During your first years on the job as an administrator were there missing experiences that you wished you had?
3. What kinds of on-the-job experiences do you believe are most important in developing a new principal's leadership skills (e.g., considering a newly assigned, first time principal)?

4. What have you seen veteran principals do on the job to revitalize and reenergize themselves later in their careers?
5. In what ways has your district enhanced/supported your leadership skills or facilitated on-the-job learning (coaching, professional development, conference attendance, principals' meetings)?
6. As you look back, what learning activities in your administrative credential program were especially important in helping you to develop practical leadership skills?
7. In what ways could your administrative credential program have better prepared you?

NOTE: These seven questions were field tested with several site principals and revised in response to their feedback and suggestions.

Through inductive analysis common themes and concepts were identified, categorized, and analyzed (Patton, 1990). Interview data were sorted according to Yukl, Gordon, and Taber's (2002) Hierarchical Taxonomy of Leadership Behavior. Their framework, which is constructed upon a half-century of behavioral research on leadership, posits three meta-categories: relations, task, and change behaviors. Our purpose was to anchor and interpret interview responses around a well-established theoretical framework.

#### *Interview Data Analysis*

We began the analysis of interview data by searching for responses that contained "recurring regularities," or common experiences and perceptions. These were identified and organized into one of the three meta-categories described by Yukl, et al. (2002). This process allowed us to interpret the interview data according to "sensitizing concepts" (Patton, 1990, p. 391). Within each meta-category, responses were further reduced through the identification of key phrases and key words. These were clustered by theme. Patton (1990, p.403) refers to this process as "convergence." Within each theme a progressive synthesizing and narrowing process allowed us to construct holistic (and in some cases heuristic) descriptions by illuminating both the emotional and conceptual content of subjects' responses.

Finally, we examined responses that were unique to a particular subject and not part of the broader patterns found across interviews. The content of each response of this type was sorted by relevance. Content that was superfluous to the topic of leadership development was discarded. Content that was germane to the topic was retained. These responses often provided interesting perspectives about the leadership development experience. In some cases they raised important questions or issues for future research studies.

## **6 RESULTS**

NOTE: To assist the reader, we provide a list of the 41 learning tasks in Appendix A.

### **6.1 Online Survey Findings**

We organized the reporting of survey results around respondent demographic data and focal research questions number two (How important are on-the-job experiences and graduate credential programs in the development of leadership expertise among urban principals?) and number three (How important are the 1996 ISLLC Standards for School Leaders in the development of leadership expertise among urban principals?) Research question one (How do urban principals develop leadership expertise?) is addressed more holistically in the discussion section of the manuscript.

### **6.2 Respondent Demographic Data**

A slight majority (52.4%) of respondents had six or more years as a principal, while 47.6% had five or fewer years of experience. Seventy-six respondents (74.8%) were female and 25 (25.2%) were male. Thirteen (12.9%) respondents fell within the 25 to 45 year old age range, while 88 (87%) were over the age of 45. Sixty-nine (68.3%) respondents served as elementary (grades K-6) principals and 32 (31.7%) served as secondary principals (grades 6-12).

### 6.3 How important are on-the-job experiences and graduate credential programs in the development of leadership expertise among urban principals?

#### Whole Group Results

When all 101 responses were analyzed in the aggregate, on-the-job experience was rated as only slightly more important than college credential programs for each of the 41 learning tasks (4.38 versus 4.07 on a five point scale).

A principal component factor analysis of responses to on-the-job experiences and credential programs reduced the 41 learning tasks to those that most strongly explained the phenomenon under analysis (e.g., what leaders learn and where they learn them). For on-the-job responses, fifteen learning tasks clustered around three factors defined as, 1) teaching and learning, 2) operations and resources, and 3) relations. We established a conservative factor-loading threshold of .500. Table 1 exhibits the three factors, their associated learning tasks, and factor loadings for responses to on-the-job experiences.

Table 1  
Factor Analysis of 41 Learning Tasks: On-the-Job Experiences

Task Number	Description	Factor loading
<b>Teaching and Learning</b>		
15	Coaching and supporting teachers	.792
34	Promote teacher collaboration	.760
23	Facilitate ongoing school improvement	.722
21	Implement teacher professional growth	.650
17	Use formative evaluation strategies	.628
39	Promote principles of equity, diversity	.592
<b>Operations and Resources</b>		
27	Manage legal requirements	.734
25	Manage fiscal resources	.715
24	Establish a safe learning environment	.664
28	Use administrative technologies	.644
12	Develop programs and procedures	.641
<b>Relations</b>		
3	Practice self-reflection	.716
4	Communicate with stakeholders	.689
32	Work with community trends and issues	.584
20	Positive community relationships	.524

For credential programs, fourteen learning tasks were clustered around the same three factors. Table 2 contains the three factors, their associated learning tasks, and factor loadings.

Table 2  
Factor Analysis of 41 Learning Tasks: Credential Programs

Task Number	Description	Factor loading
<b>Teaching and Learning</b>		
17	Use formative evaluation strategies	.752
13	Apply adult motivational strategies	.723
34	Promote teacher collaboration	.701
15	Coach and support teachers	.626
21	Implement teacher professional growth	.592
<b>Operations and Resources</b>		
25	Manage fiscal resources	.756
29	Work with bargaining agreements	.730
26	Manage school facilities	.670
27	Manage legal requirements	.633
33	Build effective media relations	.616
31	Access community resources	.615
<b>Relations</b>		
6	Build group consensus	.748
5	Dealing with competing interests	.676
11	Participatory decision-making	.560

*Subgroup Results*

As with the whole group, sub-group responses favored on-the-job experiences. However, there were subtle (but few significant) differences between sub-groups. For example, the importance of on-the-job experiences was slightly greater among more experienced principals and females. Interestingly, the importance of credential programs was also slightly greater among more experienced and female principals, as well as for high school principals and principals who earned administrative credentials through private universities. Importantly, the areas of difference between subgroups help to illuminate aspects of principal preparation and development that are not as well served by credential programs as they are by hands-on experiences in the workplace.

*On-the-Job vs. Credential Programs: Years of Experience*

Our first analysis examined the year in which respondents received their administrative credentials. Fifty (49.5%) respondents earned administrative credentials prior to the release of the ISLLC Standards in 1996. In contrast, 45 (44.6%) received credentials after 1996, and 15 (14.8%) received credentials after the adoption of No Child Left Behind in 2001. As a result, a comparatively modest number of respondents likely participated in ISLLC-based administrator credential programs.

An independent samples t-test was used to compare responses to on-the-job experiences and credential programs among principals with one and ten years of experience. For on-the-job experiences, experienced principals were significantly more likely to give the highest ratings to two learning tasks (3 and 12). For credential programs, length of experience mattered with four tasks (5, 6, 11, and 39). Table 3 highlights the significant differences between principals with one and ten years of experience for both response categories.

Table 3

*Independent Samples T-test: Less experienced versus More Experienced Principals*

Task Number and Description		Mean rating 1 year exp.	Mean rating 10 years exp.	Alpha
<b>On-the-Job Experiences</b>				
3	Practice self-reflection	4.13	4.70	.037
12	Develop programs and procedures	3.88	4.48	.029
<b>Credential Programs</b>				
5	Dealing with competing interests	2.88	4.13	.034
6	Build group consensus	3.63	4.63	.047
11	Participatory decision-making	3.13	4.38	.02
39	Promote equity and diversity	3.38	4.25	.03

*On-the-Job vs. Credential Programs: Gender*

T-test results of the responses by male and female principals to the on-the-job experience category revealed four significant differences (tasks 10, 29, 30, and 34). In each case, females were significantly more likely to give higher ratings to job experiences. Similarly, for credential programs, females gave significantly higher ratings on three tasks (tasks 27, 34, and 35). Table 4 highlights the differences between male and female principals for both response categories.

Table 4

*Independent Samples T-test: Male versus Female Principals*

Task Number and Description		Mean rating Males	Mean rating Females	Alpha
<b>On-the-Job Experiences</b>				
10	Align programs with shared vision	4.45	4.76	.029
29	Work with bargaining agreements	3.20	3.91	.028
30	Promote culture of responsibility	4.36	4.74	.012
34	Promote teacher collaboration	4.27	4.68	.009
<b>Credential Programs</b>				
27	Manage legal requirements	3.23	4.03	.005
34	Promote teacher collaboration	3.45	4.00	.047
35	Develop code of ethics	3.55	4.24	.003

*On-the-Job vs. Credential Programs: School Type*

In general, elementary principals (K-6) found on-the-job experiences most useful, while secondary principals (6-12) more frequently favored credential programs. T-test results revealed only a few significant differences. Elementary principals were more likely to give high ratings to on-the-job experiences for tasks 14 and 36 and to credential programs for tasks 13 and 34, while secondary principals gave higher ratings to task 5. Table 5 highlights the significant differences between elementary and secondary principals for both response categories.

Table 5

*Independent Samples T-test: Elementary versus Secondary Principals*

Task Number and Description		Mean rating Elementary	Mean rating Secondary	Alpha
<b>On-the-Job Experiences</b>				
14	Implement standards-based <u>curric.</u>	3.34	4.45	.024
36	Work productively with people	3.61	4.30	.05
<b>Credential Programs</b>				
5	Dealing with competing interests	3.35	3.85	.047
13	Apply adult motivational strategies	4.36	4.05	.05
34	Promote teacher collaboration	4.63	4.12	.05

**6.4 How important are the 1996 ISLLC Standards for School Leaders in the development of leadership expertise among urban principals?**

In terms of their importance to effective school leadership, the ISLLC-based learning tasks fared quite well. Thirty-two (78%) learning tasks were rated above the 80th percentile (on a scale of 0 to 1.0). By this measure, it appears that most learning tasks were important to the development of leadership expertise. In table 6 we list the top five and bottom five rated tasks and their mean values.

Table 6

*The Five Most Important and Five Least Important ISLLC Learning Tasks*

Task number and description		Mean
<i>Most Important</i>		
2	Use data to improve teaching and learning	.967
10	Align programs with a shared vision	.966
15	Coaching and support teachers	.963
18	Sustain instruction-focused school culture	.962
9	Facilitate a shared vision for the school	.943
<i>Least Important</i>		
41	Identify broad political issues and influences	.734
33	Build/maintain effective media relationships	.755
29	Work effectively with bargaining agreements	.759
40	Advocate for schools in local/state/national arenas	.762
8	Learn to use symbolic leadership	.820

*Importance of Learning Tasks: Subgroup Analysis*

Using a one-way analysis of variance test, a comparison of means by years of experience found that experienced principals were significantly more likely to give high ratings to task 29. For 16 (39%) of the 41 learning tasks, females gave significantly higher ratings than males. Finally, analyses by school level and credential program type revealed no significant differences in response patterns.

Table 7 highlights five of the most highly rated learning tasks by female respondents, the comparative mean scores between males and females, and their level of significance.

Table 7

*Five Most Highly Rated Learning Tasks by Females (with Male Comparisons)*

Task number and description	Mean rating	Mean rating	Alpha
	Female	Male	
25 Manage fiscal resources	.967	.868	.000
10 Align programs with shared vision	.981	.918	.001
18 Sustain instruction-focused culture	.978	.909	.001
15 Coach and support teachers	.976	.919	.002
5 Dealing with competing interests	.957	.861	.002

Note: Males gave tasks 2, 15, 10, 18, and 21 their highest ratings (not significant)

### 6.5 What matters most, on-the-job experiences or college credential programs, and with what skills?

The survey data reveal that on-the-job experiences and college credential programs are both important sources of learning for school leaders. With an average rating of 4.38 on a five point Likert-type scale, it is clear that on-the-job learning experiences are highly regarded by school principals as sources of leadership skill development. However, an average rating score of 4.07 underscores a strong regard for the value of college credential programs as well. An important question then, is, with which learning tasks do job experiences and credential programs matter most? Conversely, which learning tasks are not learned as well on the job or in credential programs? It is to these questions that we now direct the analysis.

As Table 8 illustrates, the job appears to be a better venue for learning how to sustain an instructionally-focused school culture, negotiate effectively with people who have competing interests, develop a strategic plan for the school, and use data to promote teaching and learning. Credential programs appear to be particularly useful as venues for learning how to develop a code of ethics, promote equity and diversity, coach and support teachers, and evaluate teachers. Finally, the job is less useful in teaching how to manage political tasks and influences, school advocacy strategies, and symbolic leadership, while credential programs are less useful in teaching media relations, collective bargaining, school facilities management, school advocacy strategies, and how to access community resources.

Table 8

*Top 5 Ranked Learning Tasks: On-the-Job and College Credential Programs*

On-the-Job Experiences		Credential Programs	
Mean	Task number and description	Mean	Task number and description
4.93	18: Sustain instruction-focused culture	4.18	35: Develop code of ethics
4.86	5: Deal with competing interests	4.13	39: Promote equity and diversity
4.85	1: Develop long-term strategic plan	4.12	15: Coach and support teachers
4.85	2: Use data to promote teaching/learning	4.09	16: Evaluate teacher performance
4.75	15: Coach and support teachers	4.08	18: Sustain instruction-focus culture
Bottom 5 Ranked Learning Tasks			
On-the-Job Experiences		Credential Programs	
3.58	41: Political issues and influences	3.04	33: Build media relationships
3.73	40: Advocate for schools (political)	3.09	29: Work with bargaining agreement
3.77	33: Build media relationships	3.20	26: Manage school facilities
3.81	29: Work with bargaining agreement	3.20	40: Advocate for schools
3.82	8: Use symbolic leadership	3.25	31: Access community resources

## 6.6 Follow-up Telephone Interview Results

### *Overview of Major Themes*

In the analysis of interview responses, our intent was to extend beyond survey responses and to identify common themes regarding perceptions about the development of leadership expertise. These themes are transcendent and apply to both college credential programs and on-the-job experiences. Five common themes emerged under Yukl's, et al. (2002) "relations behavior" category.

1. The importance of shadowing practicing administrators.
2. Developing a professional network of principal colleagues for support and mentoring.
3. Valuing the contributions of each member of the school's certificated and classified staff.
4. Understanding that the members of high functioning schools operate as teams.
5. Developing a personal commitment to ongoing personal and professional growth, new learning, and goal directed behaviors.

Four key themes emerged under the "task behaviors" category (Yukl, et. al, 2002). The first three pertain to both college credential programs and on-the-job experiences and their impact on the development of leadership expertise.

1. More direct experiences with school budget preparation.
2. Increased emphasis on the supervision and evaluation of teachers.
3. More experiences using different venues, strategies, and styles of communication with school staff members and the community.
4. College credential programs that place greater emphasis on the practical needs, issues, and tasks of school administration and less emphasis on theory.

Under Yukl's (2002) category of "change behavior" five common themes emerged.

1. Executive coaching during one's early years in administration to develop confidence in one's professional knowledge and ability to promote change across the organization.
2. An awareness of, and sensitivity to, the importance of school culture in the development and implementation of successful organizational change efforts.
3. District sponsored trainings and professional development activities.
4. Having a district office supervisor who supported ongoing professional development.
5. Working with a professional learning community of principals to promote ongoing growth and support and the exchange of useful ideas.

As we coded and organized interview data, we often experienced difficulty in sorting data into the most appropriate category. For example, understanding that the members of high functioning schools operate as teams is essential to maintaining positive relationships, while it is also an essential component of change behavior, and a mechanism for structuring the accomplishment of workplace tasks. As a result, we placed themes in categories where the conceptual "fit" was strongest, but not necessarily exclusive.

### *Interview Questions: Common Themes*

In a second level of analysis, we organized and synthesized responses according to their relationship to key interview questions. Again, we used the three meta-categories of leadership behaviors as a framework for organizing information and sharpening the analysis (Yukl, et al., 2002).

**Important on-the-job experiences in the development of leadership expertise.** Numerous respondents expressed the importance of the job in helping to build and maintain positive relationships. Some described this in very general terms, while others used specific phrases like "being available to staff and being visible with people," "learning to stop and listen," "listening to diverse needs," "treating people fairly," and "learning not to be judgmental." The job was also important in teaching principals to work productively with individuals or groups that provided important on-the-job experiences such as cluster meetings with other principals, mentoring by a veteran principal, or interactions with labor unions.

Several task experiences such as dealing with the complexities of a school budget and the supervision, evaluation and documentation of teachers were deemed particularly important for new principals. Other important task-related experiences included managing multiple priorities and tasks; opening and closing school; managing the district's curriculum; learning how to assess teaching to improve student achievement; ensuring student safety, and a developing a systematic approach to promoting teaching and learning and managing school resources.

Relating to change behaviors, respondents noted the importance of "learning the culture" and "thinking about the whole staff and unit" before setting a vision or assessing school needs. Several respondents also talked about strategies for dealing with difficult staff and "working with the naysayers who block the team." Almost all respondents agreed that adopting an administrative disposition was an essential element of school change leadership. Finally, critical about the efficacy of college credential programs, some respondents stated that "there is nothing like sitting in the chair" and "almost everything I learned was on the job."

**Missing on-the-job experiences during one's first years.** When asked about missing experiences during one's first years, relationship issues continued to be most frequently cited by respondents. Some expressed regret at not "having a network of people you trust to call upon," others noted that it took time to "forge deep and durable relationships, learn how to bring the community and parents together, implement shared decision making, and develop strong communication skills."

For task behavior one area was conspicuously problematic for new principals—inexperience in working with budgets. Other commonly cited missing experiences included, practice coaching teachers, analyzing instructional data, curriculum leadership, and training in public relations. Finally, learning how to manage change in a complex organization, developing "one's own vision," and how to "navigate the system" were acquired skills for most principals. As with many other aspects of leadership expertise, when it came to promoting school-wide change, new principals typically had very few experiences to draw upon.

**Important on-the-job experiences in developing a new principal's leadership skills.** Two relations-based themes were strongly endorsed by several respondents, a) recognizing that everyone is important to the successful accomplishment of the functions, mission, and goals of the school, and b) developing a team culture. Building a supportive learning community among school stakeholders requires that new principals recognize the synergistic potential of the entire staff and promote collegiality, collaboration, communications, and mutual trust. Once again, the issue of budget management was prominent as was the supervision and evaluation of teachers. Other important task behaviors for new principals included contract management, student discipline, dealing with irate parents, and managing tough conversations over academic standards.

Several respondents advised new principals to adopt thoughtful, yet cautionary, approaches to change management. Comments included, "look and listen," "learn from strong teachers," and "obtain knowledge of the climate and culture" before pursuing change initiatives.

Respondents also provided a number of ancillary, yet constructive, suggestions for new principals. Among these were, "learn to trust and delegate," "trust your instinct and judgments," "follow-up with what you say," "realize your style [and] self-reflect," "not take things too personally," and "reach out to the community." Finally, having a mentor was widely recognized as an important experience for new principals.

**On-the-job learning: What veteran principals do to revitalize themselves.** We asked veteran principals how they used on-the-job experiences to stimulate their own learning and professional development. Common relations-based themes included the importance of networking, sharing, and connecting with other principals, and adopting a service-oriented approach to the job. Almost every principal commented that being "really passionate, and in it for the kids," and "staying involved with kids" helped to revitalize them.

Task related strategies for professional revitalization included mentoring new principals, involvement in a professional association, taking advanced coursework, grant writing, district level committee participation, and other professional development training.

In describing change behavior, Yukl's (2002) leadership taxonomy identifies actions that encompass scanning the external environment, proposing new strategies, and/or encouraging innovative thinking. Seventeen of the 20 respondents endorsed one or more of these concepts. Respondents also noted the importance of, "setting higher goals for self and school," "going for greater challenges," and staying current with "your pro-

fessional development and professional readings.” Such comments underscore an achievement orientation present in many leaders and that is consistent with longstanding research on effective leadership (Yukl, 1994).

And finally, several respondents noted the importance of having a sense of humor, taking care of yourself outside of the job, and coming to grips with the fact that you can’t control the willful behaviors of others.

***How districts can support principal leadership through on-the-job learning.*** When asked to share specific actions or support systems present in their own districts that enhanced their leadership skills and learning, seven common responses surfaced.

1. Thirteen respondents reported that their districts provided useful professional growth activities (e.g., “if the district doesn’t have it they find it,” and “they are great trainings”).
2. Thirteen respondents cited their district’s support for professional conference attendance.
3. Nine respondents mentioned specific activities that support their participation in professional learning communities with job-alike principals in their districts or across levels. Comments included, “principals meet as a learning community where there is lots of networking and sharing of strengths,” “we take learning walks...visit schools to learn from each other,” and “we have principal meetings by area with book studies and sharing of strategies and trends.”
4. Eight respondents specifically mentioned the support they received from a coach or mentor, often when they first became a principal in the district. Sometimes the coach was a retired principal, in other cases it was the assistant superintendent or an outside executive coach.
5. Seven respondents specifically mentioned principals’ meetings as an important source of support (e.g., “they are practical and focused on instruction,” “we have relevant activities and deal with program issues” and, “principal meetings are filled with discussion, challenges and sharing”).
6. Four respondents commented about the support they received from their district offices. Comments included, “they are more friendly to us than ever before,” “they push us to the next level,” “they design what works for us (in reference to principal training and support)” and, “they support creativity and innovativeness.”
7. Several interviewees stated that the district’s evaluation system, goal and standard setting processes and the development of professional growth plans enhanced their leadership skills.

***Helpful Leadership Development Activities in Administrative Credential Programs.*** Strong credential programs were particularly helpful in providing opportunities to observe and shadow practicing administrators who could connect learning with real world situations and environments. Learning activities that combined “research and reality” (e.g., job embedded projects and fieldwork) were also useful, as was learning in a cohort setting and working in teams. As one principal aptly stated, “it takes teamwork to make the dream work.” Other helpful program activities included participation in an assessment center, projects on cultural awareness, and learning activities on how to manage difficult students, the curriculum, budgeting, outcome-based instruction, and accountability requirements.

Several respondents shared negative feelings about their credential programs (e.g., it “was just another hoop to jump through,” “absolutely nothing was helpful...it was not practical”). One principal cynically stated, “no, it’s all on the job, they can’t really prepare you.”

***Suggestions for how Credential Programs Can Better Prepare Principals.*** Particularly important suggestions for improving administrative credential programs included, a shadowing or field experience (e.g., “sitting in the principal’s chair for a week or two”); providing budget and facilities management learning activities and experiences; better training in school law and special education; more practical and less theoretical coursework, and community engagement strategies. Finally, despite the many recommendations offered by respondents, virtually each agreed with the proposition that “no matter what you do in preparation you must hit the ground running and learn on the job.”

## 7 DISCUSSION

“Each principal develops his/her own theory about the role of the principal and themselves as principals.” This quote from D. J. McGough (2002, p. 6), underscores the difficulty in trying to establish causal propositions about the development of professional expertise. Who we are and what we have yet to become are the products of an enormously complex array of experiences, personality characteristics, motivations, aspirations, skills, social environments, and dispositions. We become good at what we do through distinctively experienced learning processes, environments, and life altering events (Nohria, Lawrence, & Nohria, 2002).

In addressing the key questions that framed this study, the findings provide useful insights, but not irrefutable conclusions. As is often the case when researching the complexities of human behavior, inevitable limitations arise regarding research design, methodologies used, and the theoretical foundations upon which the research rests. For example, it is important to consider that the principalship is not the only administrative position through which one develops leadership expertise. Most principals begin their careers as assistant principals and often have years in which to develop and hone their leadership skills. Our research did not control for this, and as a result the findings cannot account for the mediating influence of the assistant principalship on the development of a principal’s expertise. It is also true that learning from a credential program and on the job are not dichotomous activities. What one learns on the job, and how well, is undoubtedly influenced by one’s credential program experience. Moreover, not all principal preparation programs are equivalent in terms of their design and modes of delivery. Similarly, the qualities and characteristics of on-the-job experiences are inherently variable and individually unique. Our findings do not account for such differences, and, consequently, cannot be confidently generalized to all urban principals. Finally, the findings from our research are based entirely on the self-reported perceptions of urban principals. No other data were collected nor were direct observations made to corroborate these accounts. Therefore, it is with caution and prudence that we offer the following analyses and interpretations.

### 7.1 How Do Urban Principals Develop Leadership Expertise?

While on-the-job experiences were more important to principals than credential program experiences, we cannot dismiss the fairly high ratings given to credential programs by survey respondents. Importantly, the survey results do not warrant a *carte blanche* condemnation of credential programs, and certainly not to the extent expressed by their most vocal critics.

The telephone interviews painted a more complex, and subtle picture. First, when supported by meaningful district office professional development activities, the job provided a form of leverage that enhanced workplace learning and deepened new knowledge structures. Second, credential programs provided an intellectual and cognitive framework for making sense of workplace experiences. Although for some respondents the credential program provided a weak foundation for leadership development, for others the opposite was true.

How one judges the quality of learning via credential programs versus on-the-job experiences is important. Even if principals learn more on the job, the quality of learning may not be better than that experienced in credential programs. Stanford professor James March explained that the closer in temporal proximity managers are to meaningful events, the more importance they attribute to them (March, 2009). Following this logic, with each passing year the knowledge, skills, and dispositions acquired in a credential program lose ground to the influence and impact of real world experiences on how principals behave and think. Our point is that exact parallels are impossible to make when comparing the relative importance of college credential programs and on-the-job experiences. Following March’s logic, one could reasonably predict that credential programs would only rarely exceed the importance of on-the-job experience in the development of leadership expertise.

Administrator credential programs were never meant to replicate the workplace. At best they are designed to simulate workplace environments, develop important management skills, and reorient the professional dispositions of candidates (Hallinger & Bridges, 2007). Nevertheless, a core problem with many programs is that they are overly generic and designed to accommodate the needs of the profession at large (Davis, et al., 2006). As a result, graduates’ perceptions of program relevance will inevitably vary in proportion to the

degree in which the knowledge, skills, and dispositions gained through participation in them align with the needs, contexts, and conditions of their employing school districts.

The notion that more rigorous and innovative school leadership preparation programs can magically transform classroom teachers into practice-ready school turnaround specialists defies the logic of leadership expertise and its development (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986; Gladwell, 2008). This leads us to a disquieting dilemma in the comparative analysis of college credential programs and on-the-job experiences—how should we weigh the relative importance of each venue in teaching people to lead schools?

Mezirow's (1997) theory of transformative learning provides some clarity to this question. Professional development activities that are robust, hands-on, and that vigorously challenge a participant's deeply held assumptions promote powerful new learning experiences. Such activities can occur in formally structured learning environments like credential programs or in more fluid and dynamic settings like the workplace. In either case, the transformative experience must be facilitated through a constructivist relationship between the learner and teacher (e.g., professor, site supervisor, or mentor). However, to optimize the potency of the workplace as a venue for professional development, learning activities must be thoughtfully structured upon personal reflections, feedback from supervisors, and dialogue with significant others (Evans, K., 2002; Fenwick, 2003).

Our findings demonstrate that the 1996 ISLLC standards are widely perceived as valid and important benchmarks of administrative competence by urban principals. This conclusion is supported by the finding that 78% of the 41 ISLLC-based learning standards were considered to be important elements of administrative practice by our respondents. Given the widespread adoption of these standards by administrative credential programs, the influence of these standards on professional learning has been positive and durable (Murphy, 2003).

In the absence of a non-urban control group, our study was not designed to make sharp empirical distinctions between the perspectives of urban and non-urban principals. However, since each of our respondents was a principal in a large urban district, their perspectives and experiences are clearly pertinent to urban school leadership. Nevertheless, additional research is needed to identify with precision the aspects of leadership development that are particularly germane to urban settings.

### **7.1.1 The Relative Importance of Administrative Credential Programs and On-the-Job Experience**

There are some important differences among principal subgroups in their perceptions about the comparative importance of credential programs and on-the-job experiences in the development of leadership expertise. In some cases we were able to propose empirically grounded explanations, in other cases we could only conjecture.

Our first analysis examined the perceptions of inexperienced versus experienced principals. In keeping with the logic of March's proposition about the salience of temporally proximal events, it was not surprising that experienced principals more frequently gave the highest ratings to on-the-job experiences than did less experienced principals. As noted above, these differences were statistically significant for only a few tasks. Interestingly, with more experienced principals, credential programs were a more important source of learning for tasks that fell within the "decision-making" category derived from our factor analysis (e.g., dealing with competing interests, building group consensus, facilitating participatory decision-making, and promoting equity and diversity).

These differences speak to a generational gap between principals who were trained before and after the advent of No Child Left Behind. Prior to No Child Left Behind, the criticality of data-based decision making to school reform efforts was far less pronounced than it is today. In the current No Child Left Behind world, a much deeper emphasis has been placed on rational-logical educational structures, systems, processes, and decisions than ever before. Leadership skills requiring democratic forms of decision-making and relationship building may have lost ground to a more analytical orientation to school administration.

Our second analysis examined the comparative ratings of credential programs and on-the-job experiences between genders. For female principals, on-the-job experience was a significantly more important source

for learning than for males in four task areas, a) how to align programs with a shared vision, b) how to work with collective bargaining agreements, c) promoting a culture of responsibility and accountability, and d) promoting teacher collaboration. Three of these tasks fall squarely within the category of developing relationships (these also align well with our factor analysis and with Yukl's taxonomy).

One possible explanation is that females may be more sensitive to social nuances and relationships than males. Since the essence of negotiation implies a degree of empathy and compromise, it is possible that females "read" their social environments better than men and are more effective at finding common ground among those with diverse backgrounds and/or competing interests (Gerson & Peiss, 1985). Of course, another implication is that males are predisposed to be comparatively weak in terms of conducting social relationships. Although we are not prepared to entertain such a conclusion, we suggest that credential programs could (and should) pay particular attention to learning activities that expose males to diverse social environments and that enhance their sensitivity to differences in perspectives among people with diverse backgrounds.

As a group, female principals were more consistent than males in their regard for the importance of on-the-job experiences. On 37 of the 41 learning tasks, females gave the highest ratings to on-the-job experiences, whereas males gave the highest ratings to only 30 tasks. Ruderman and Ohlott (2002) offer a plausible explanation for this discrepancy. In many complex organizations, males are exposed to more significant learning opportunities than women. This phenomenon holds true at all levels of an organization's employment hierarchy. If Ruderman and Ohlott's proposition is correct, men who become school principals are more likely than women to have had a history of job-related exposures to administrative environments and activities as teachers and assistant principals. By the time many males become principals they have accumulated a larger repertoire of important administrative experiences than females. In contrast, females who become principals may be more likely to find greater novelty in the routine roles, and tasks of the job than do males. Once again, if March's proposition about the salience of temporally proximal events is true, then the results of our gender analysis make more sense.

Comparisons between elementary and secondary principals yielded two particularly noteworthy differences. For secondary principals the job was a more important source of learning about how to implement a standards-based curriculum and working productively with people who have different values and beliefs. The political complexities of the urban American secondary school are legendary. Thus, the latter finding is not surprising. However, that the job is a particularly important source of learning for secondary principals on how to implement a standards-based curriculum may suggest that administrative credential programs are more effectively organized and structured around the elementary curricula.

### **7.1.2 How Do National Standards for School Leadership Influence the Development of Leadership Expertise?**

A review of the five most highly ranked learning tasks illuminates what contemporary urban principals believe are the most relevant components of effective school leadership. All five fall within the category of "teaching and learning" and figure prominently in the literature on effective educational leadership and policy making. Moreover, as a body, these tasks encompass many core concepts commonly associated with instructional leadership: using data to improve teaching and learning, aligning programs and professional development with a clear vision, creating an instructionally-focused culture, coaching and supporting teachers, and establishing a shared vision of learning for the school (Murphy, 2002; Woolford & Hoy, 2008).

Interestingly, four of the five lowest ranked learning tasks contained political aspects of the principalship that have long been associated with urban education (e.g., staying abreast of local, state, and national trends and issues; building positive media relations; working with collective bargaining agreements; political advocacy for schools). Similarly low rankings were found for learning tasks relating to managing facilities and grounds, working with communities, and being aware of useful community resources.

One explanation for these low rankings is the intense focus today on instructional leadership generated by No Child Left Behind and on the growing body of research relating to leadership and student achievement (Darling-Hammond, et al. 2007). The mandates and sanctions contained within No Child Left Behind—as

well as numerous state reform policies—have virtually assured the narrowing of principals’ attentions. We are not prepared to comment on whether the refocused roles of school leaders have resulted in better teaching and learning. However, eight years after the implementation of No Child Left Behind, serious concerns remain about persistent achievement gaps, the persistent underachievement of minority students, and the capacity of public schools to engage in transformative reform (Hamilton, Stecher, & Yuan, 2009; Vanneman, Hamilton, Baldwin Anderson, & Rahman, 2009).

Clearly, urban principals today are highly focused on roles and tasks related to the management of instruction, comparatively less focused on the traditional management components of the job, and held accountable for the academic performance of students and the professional practices of teachers. Moreover, they must ensure that the functions, goals, and performance outcomes of their schools are highly transparent and accessible to parents and community members. Our findings support current literature and policy imperatives that portray the primary role of the principal as an instructional leader (Seashore Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010).

Our findings also point to the unevenness of the 1996 ISLLC standards. Not all standards are considered equally important to urban principals, although ISLLC crafted them without preferential weightings. In addition, the recently revised ISLLC standards (2008) feature several criteria deemed relatively unimportant by contemporary urban principals. The new standards highlight the importance of effective management of school operations; collaborating with community members; working effectively with diverse communities; the ability to mobilize community resources, and keeping abreast of political, social, economic, legal, and cultural trends and contexts. However, the principals in our study found these to be less important than the criteria pertaining to instructional leadership. Granted, implicit (and in some cases explicit) within the revised ISLLC standards is the primary goal of promoting powerful teaching and learning. Nevertheless, our findings suggest a gap between the revised ISLLC standards and current practices and perspectives of urban principals.

### **7.1.3 Lessons Learned From the Follow up Interviews**

The results of the interviews provided depth and context regarding the factors that influence leadership development and practice. They also illuminated aspects of school leadership that are especially important to principals, and conversely, aspects that are comparatively unimportant. Finally, they provided insights that could be useful in the development and operation of administrator credential programs.

Nevertheless, we found few discernable patterns among interview respondents regarding the factors deemed most important to leadership and/or leadership development. Responses covered several criteria contained in the 1996 and 2008 ISLLC standards (e.g., instructional leadership, collaborations, shared vision, school culture, operations management, teacher evaluation, communications, ethical leadership, and leadership style). A common topic of concern was the failure of credential programs to provide sufficient training in budget management. As a consequence, budget management was learned on the job (essentially “trial by fire”). Likewise, for most respondents credential programs failed to provide a robust and useful practicum (e.g., fieldwork activities were not comprehensive, few opportunities were provided to shadow school administrators, mentoring relationships were weak—if they existed at all, and performance feedback was inconsistent and shallow). Also prominently missing (or only occasionally cited) from the interview responses were topics relating to student achievement data analysis, use of technology, student discipline, and self-reflection.

However, the interview data pointed to a number of factors that were particularly helpful in the development of leadership expertise. We were impressed by the large number of principals who reported that district sponsored professional development activities have become increasingly important resources for their own professional growth and learning. They also described an increase in district support for professional learning communities that enabled new learning, problem solving, and the sharing of challenges and successful practices among principals. Throughout the interviews the commitment for (and pursuit of) professional growth and self-improvement was a consistent theme. Respondents were passionate about their jobs and deeply committed to making their schools better places for all children to learn.

Several respondents also spoke to the importance of their school district principal evaluation system in providing focus and direction for their own professional growth. Not surprising (at least to those of us who have been school principals), was the importance of having access to a network of colleagues who can provide professional and emotional support.

An important objective of our study was to use interview responses to extend beyond the survey responses. Most notable was our finding that the development of leadership expertise was stimulated by college credential programs and honed through the unique intersection of professional experiences and personal characteristics. Together these elements provided both the grist and the impetus for the development of leadership expertise.

#### 7.1.4 The Larger Lessons From Our Study

Theories of adult learning, experiential learning, transformative learning, and situated cognition have been part of the education research landscape for decades, and yet many of the basic concepts and principles regarding how adults best learn have been conspicuously missing from the administrative credential experiences of many principals. Both credential programs and on-the-job learning experiences have the potential to provide relevant and robust learning experiences that can advance professional leadership expertise. In the ideal, the two venues, when structured properly, can provide progressive and developmentally appropriate professional learning for school administrators. To do this well requires that both venues employ learning activities that are designed around seven key principles of adult learning (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005; Mezirow, 1991).

1. Learning activities are self-directed.
2. Past experiences are used to understand and interpret new information.
3. New information is important and relevant to them personally.
4. They are provided with problem-based learning activities that require the integration of new knowledge, past experience, and problem-solving activities.
5. They confront disorienting dilemmas that challenge deeply held perspectives, assumptions, beliefs, and world-views.
6. Opportunities are provided to engage in professional discourse with peers around topics relevant to their jobs.
7. They become progressively less dependent upon their teachers and more dependent upon their own powers of inquiry.

Descriptions of credential programs by many respondents in our study do not closely match these principles of adult learning. In addition, the credential programs described by respondents were typically generic in structure (e.g., one-size-fits-all) and often perceived as irrelevant to the unique workplace demands of principals.

Our findings also point to several suggestions for how credential programs and school districts can enhance the leadership skills of principals. When we compared the five most important learning tasks to the profession at-large with the five highest rated tasks under the categories of on-the-job job experiences and credential programs, we found several gaps between what tasks were learned, and where, and their overall importance to the profession. For example, the five learning tasks most important to urban principals were, a) using data to improve teaching and learning, b) aligning programs with a clear vision for the school, c) coaching and supporting teachers, d) establishing an instructionally focused school culture, and e) developing a shared vision of learning. However, the five tasks most likely to be learned in credential programs overlapped in only two cases—coaching and supporting teachers, and establishing an instructionally focused school culture. Credential programs were not judged as being particularly good venues for learning how to use data to improve teaching and learning or aligning educational programs with, and developing, a shared vision for the school. Interestingly, whereas credential programs were deemed to be good places to learn how to promote the principles of equity and diversity, this task was not rated highly in terms of its importance to the profession.

In contrast, the five highest rated tasks under on-the-job experiences overlapped with three of the five most important tasks to the profession at large, a) using data to improve teaching and learning, b) coaching and supporting teachers, and c) promoting an instructionally focused culture. Job experiences fell short in only two areas deemed most important to the profession, a) aligning programs with a clear vision for the school, and b) developing a shared vision of learning. It is important to note that neither credential programs nor the workplace were highly rated as venues for learning how to manage budgets. These findings provide both credential faculty and superintendents with clear foci for developing more relevant training and professional development activities for urban principals.

Credential programs must work harder (and smarter) to provide learning activities that are more sharply developed around contextually relevant workplace situations and environments. Although credential programs will never supplant the importance of on-the-job experience in the development of leadership expertise, they can (and should) prime candidates for the complexities of professional practice by designing problem-based learning activities that treat the tasks and roles of school administration as highly relational and integrated. This will require a fundamental paradigm shift for many professors of educational administration (e.g., away from being a “sage on the stage” and toward becoming a “guide on the side,” and away from treating the highly relational dimensions of administrative work as independent domains of knowledge).

The potential to use on-the-job experiences as vehicles for professional growth and development has not been fully understood, appreciated, or utilized by school district administrators who supervise site principals. However, the interview results suggest that school districts can more effectively leverage on-the-job experiences to enhance principal expertise through the mechanisms of principal evaluation processes, the alignment of professional development activities with evidentiary data relating to school performance outcomes, by formalizing and supporting an ongoing professional network of principals, and by establishing and supporting professional learning communities (Darling-Hammond, et. al, 2007).

To conclude, it is unfortunately true that the closer one looks in the mirror, the more evident one’s blemishes become. This has certainly been the case with administrative credential programs in recent years. But blemishes notwithstanding, the increased scrutiny by researchers, policy makers, and practitioners of the structures, processes, and outcomes of administrator preparation programs in America has engendered a number of fresh ideas and practices in the field. We refer to the intriguing examples of innovation provided by non-profit principal preparation programs like New Leaders for New Schools, school districts like New York City, and university programs like Delta State University. Programs like these have been informed (if not stimulated) by the experiential learning theories of researchers like David Kolb (1983), the transformative learning theories of Jack Mezirow (1997), the problem-based learning approaches pioneered by Philip Hallinger and Edwin Bridges (2007), and the school leadership development research by Joseph Murphy (2002), and others. The point is, that administrator preparation in America is in transition: away from the sclerotic, generic, and decontextualized academic practices of the past 50 years and toward a more organic, adaptive, and contextually focused endeavor steeped in the day-to-day realities and challenges of the workplace.

Nevertheless, it is probably true that the relevance and impact of administrator credential programs will always be subordinate to on-the-job experiences. As a result, we gently remind our colleagues in the field (as well as policy makers) that even the most progressively designed and effectively executed credential program cannot be expected to produce “practice-ready” school principals equipped with a full repertoire of skills needed to transform public schools. The development of expertise requires time and practice (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986; Gladwell, 2008). Granted, college programs can do (and in many cases are doing) a better job of constructing a solid conceptual scaffold for the development of effective school leaders, but at the end of the day, there is no substitute for experience.

## 7.2 REFERENCES

[CLICK HERE](#) to view REFERENCE SECTION<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>See the file at <[http://cnx.org/content/m45760/latest/Davis References.pdf](http://cnx.org/content/m45760/latest/Davis%20References.pdf)>

### 7.3 APPENDIX A

[CLICK HERE](#) to view APPENDIX A<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>See the file at <<http://cnx.org/content/m45760/latest/Davis Appendix A.pdf>>

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## Appendix A

## Online Survey Questions

Part I: Descriptive/Demographic Information

1. How many years have you worked as a school principal?
2. In what types of schools have you worked as a principal? For how many years?
3. In what type of institution/program did you earn your administrative credential/license?
4. Please indicate the name of the institution/program where you received your initial administrative credential/license.
5. When was your initial administrative credential/license issued?
6. What is your highest degree?
7. What type of district do you currently work in?
8. How many students are currently enrolled in your school?
9. What is the approximate percentage of students who qualify for the Free and Reduced Lunch Program in your school?
10. What percent of students in your school fall within the following ethnic profiles? (African American, Asian, Hispanic, Middle Eastern, Native American, Pacific Islander, White, other)
11. Please indicate your gender.
12. Please indicate your age group.

Part II: ISLLC-Based Learning Tasks

- Task 1: Learning how to develop and implement a long-term strategic plan for your school.
- Task 2: Learning how to identify, collect, prioritize, and analyze data to promote powerful teaching and learning and to advance student achievement.
- Task 3: Learning how to practice deep and forthright self-reflection about your job performance, behaviors, decisions, actions, values, and beliefs.
- Task 4: Learning how to communicate important information about the school, its programs, processes, and accomplishments to multiple stakeholders.
- Task 5: Learning how to negotiate effectively with people who have diverse or competing interests.
- Task 6: Learning how to bring a group to consensus around a challenging decision.
- Task 7: Learning how to apply systems thinking in the management of school programs, change efforts, and operations.
- Task 8: Learning how to use symbolic leadership (e.g, rituals, ceremonies, specific behaviors) in the pursuit of important school goals.
- Task 9: Learning how to facilitate the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community.
- Task 10: Learning how to align program development, planning and professional activities with a clearly articulated and shared vision for the school.
- Task 11: Learning how to involve multiple school stakeholders in important decisions, programs, and activities that matter for student learning.

- Task 12: Learning how to apply important theories and concepts about learning in the planning and development of educational programs, teacher evaluation procedures, and staff development activities.
- Task 13: Learning how adult motivational strategies can be applied in the development of professional growth activities for teachers and staff and continuous school-wide improvement efforts.
- Task 14: Learning how to design, implement, evaluate, and refine a standards-based curriculum.
- Task 15: Learning how to apply the principles of effective instruction to coach and support teachers and to promote powerful teaching and learning.
- Task 16: Learning how to measure and evaluate teacher performance according to empirically supported standards of effective teaching.
- Task 17: Learning how to use key principles of adult learning to inform and improve formative evaluation strategies and procedures.
- Task 18: Learning how to assess, nurture, and sustain a school culture and instructional program that is conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.
- Task 19: Learning how to use technology to improve teaching and learning.
- Task 20: Learning how to cultivate and maintain positive relationships with community leaders and groups through effective communications and active involvement.
- Task 21: Learning how to plan and implement professional growth activities for teachers and staff that are aligned with the teaching and learning goals of the school and student needs.
- Task 22: Learning how to use different decision-making strategies to address different situational demands.
- Task 23: Learning how to draw upon the principles of organizational development and behavior to plan and facilitate ongoing school-wide improvement and change processes.
- Task 24: Learning how to establish systems and procedures to ensure a safe and productive learning environment for students, teachers, and staff.
- Task 25: Learning how to manage fiscal resources accurately, legally, and effectively in ways that promote the educational goals of the school.
- Task 26: Learning how to manage school facilities and grounds in ways that promote the educational goals of the school and that are fiscally sound.
- Task 27: Learning how to manage the legal requirements of school operations and programs, personnel management, and student affairs.
- Task 28: Learning how to develop and manage administrative technologies to improve the management of student data and organizational systems.
- Task 29: Learning how to work effectively with collective bargaining agreements.
- Task 30: Learning how to promote a culture of shared responsibility, ownership, and personal accountability among all school stakeholders.
- Task 31: Learning how to access community resources that can improve teaching and learning.
- Task 32: Learning how to recognize and work successfully with shifting community trends, issues, and needs.
- Task 33: Learning how to build and maintain effective relationships with the media.
- Task 34: Learning how to promote professional collaborations among teachers and staff.
- Task 35: Learning how to develop and use a professional code of ethics and a philosophy of education to guide leadership behavior and decision-making.
- Task 36: Learning how to work productively with people who have values, beliefs, or ethical standards different from your own.

- Task 37: Learning how to adopt the personal and professional orientations and dispositions necessary to lead effectively.
- Task 38: Learning how different models of school governance can work to advance the school's vision, mission, goals, and powerful teaching and learning for all students.
- Task 39: Learning how to promote the principles of equity, respect for diversity, and the role of schooling in a democratic society among all school stakeholders.
- Task 40: Learning how to advocate for schools through local, state, and national political arenas.
- Task 41: Learning how to identify important national and global political, economic, and social trends and issues and their potential influence on public schools.