An Examination of the Impact of Educational Leadership Field Experience Structure on Instructional Leadership Preparedness

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This pilot study investigated the relationship between principal preparation program (PPP) field experience structure and principal instructional leadership preparedness as measured by state certification exams and state-wide student assessment results. The researchers sought to determine if a statistically significant difference existed in principal certification examination scores between principals who completed part-time practicums while maintaining their classroom teaching duties and principals who completed a year-long, full-time internship as part of their PPP. Further, the researchers sought to determine the impact on school-wide student achievement scores for both groups of principals during their first year in a principalship. Findings indicated a statistically significant difference in median state leadership licensure examination scores between the two groups, with internship principals (IP) scoring significantly higher than practicum principals (PP). Other findings indicated, both, PPs and IPs positively impacted SA levels in their first year as principal with schools led by PPs making higher gains in school-wide student achievement scores and schools led by IPs meeting school-wide growth, as measured by the state accountability model, at a higher rate. These findings may aid key constituents in re-envisioning the structure of their current field experiences and re-examining preparation practices to explore innovative methods to prepare school leaders who are trained for the complexity of today's principal role.

Keywords: *leadership, educational leadership, principal preparation, principal certification, school improvement, program evaluation*

Since the creation of the principal's position, the role of principal has evolved from the *keeper of the keys*, chiefly responsible for building maintenance and discipline, to one of the integral *keys to student success*. Today's principals are responsible for a multitude of areas that impact the achievement of all students including curriculum planning and supervision, managing funds, ensuring legislative compliance, implementing reforms, and most notably, instructional leadership (Johnson, 2016; Pannell, Peltier-Glaze, Haynes, Davis, & Skelton, 2015). Educational leadership preparation programs are charged with the immense task of preparing instructional leaders with the knowledge and skills to lead schools to increased student achievement; however, a vast body of research spanning nearly two decades indicates educational leadership training programs have failed to keep pace with the evolving principal's role (Duncan, Range, & Scherz, 2011; Hernandez, Roberts, & Menchaca, 2012; Hess & Kelly, 2007; Lashway, 1999; Levine, 2005; Lynch, 2012; Miller, 2013; Pannell et al., 2015; Reed & Kinsler, 2010; Zubnzycki, 2013).

In the United States, educator licensure requirements vary from state to state, and principal preparation practices vary among colleges, universities, and alternative preparation programs. According to Hernandez et al. (2012), researchers in the field of educational leadership have declared the quality of leadership provided by school and district leaders is highly dependent upon the quality of their leadership preparation experiences, and the majority of school leaders are not equipped to successfully assume the responsibilities the job requires (Johnson, 2016). Highlighted discrepancies between preparation and practice along with increased accountability of the principal has forced colleges, universities, alternative preparation programs, and departments of education to re-examine preparation practices and begin exploring innovative methods to prepare school leaders who are prepared for the complexity of today's principal role.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between principals' educational leadership program field experience structures and instructional leadership preparedness. The study sought to determine if a statistically significant difference existed in principal certification examination scores between principals who completed part-time practicums while maintaining their classroom teaching duties and principals who completed a year-long, full-time internship as part of their principal preparation program. Further, the study sought to determine the impact on school-wide student achievement for both groups of principals during their first year in a principalship. The study examined gains and losses in school-wide student achievement scores for each group of principals using the previous administration's school-wide student achievement score as a baseline to calculate school-wide student achievement score (SA) differentials for each participant. Additionally, the study examined the percentage of schools meeting school-wide growth residual expectations set forth in the state accountability model.

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. Is there a statistically significant difference in principal licensure examination scores between principals who completed a part-time practicum and principals who completed a full-time internship during their educational leadership preparation program?
2. Is there a relationship between field experience structure and principal impact on student achievement during the first year of the principalship?

Significance of the Study

Past research contends principal leadership may be the second most influential factor in student achievement, surpassed only by the effect of the classroom teacher (Joyce & Showers, 2002; Lynch, 2012; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Mendels & Mitgang, 2013; Miller, 2013). According to Davis and Darling-Hammond (2012), principal leadership may explain as much as 25% of the variation in student learning attributed to school-related factors. With so much effect on student outcomes, it is essential educational leadership preparation programs equip principals with the knowledge and skills to lead schools to increased student achievement.

This study could be significant to university faculty and staff as they prepare future school leaders and design field-based experiences for their respective programs. Additionally, other colleges, universities, departments of education, and alternative preparation programs could draw on this study as they develop, evaluate, and enhance PPPs. The study could also be significant to school districts and practicing administrators as they plan and participate in professional development for school leaders.

Conceptual Framework

Much has been written about the increasing complexity of the principal's role and the challenges of preparing school leaders who are ready to face the challenges present in today's schoolhouses. Leadership can be the single most impactful factor in moving schools forward because leaders either directly or indirectly influence every aspect of the schoolhouse. Augustine-Shaw and Reilly (2017) asserted that leadership practices have a strong, measurable effect on student achievement, teaching quality, and school climate and culture. The authors noted leadership sets conditions and expectations for excellent instruction and a culture of ongoing learning for both students and educators.

Young (2019) noted that, although the demands for principals continue to mount, support systems for novice principals have not changed or received significant momentum. However, preparing good leaders depends not only on creating strong support structures during early years of practice, but providing quality initial professional learning. Augustine-Shaw and Reilly (2017) asserted one way to build capacity in novice principals is through effective mentoring practices. Principal preparation programs could help reduce the initial gaps in knowledge and skills, or the leadership gap, of novice principals by incorporating meaningful, effective mentoring practices during the course of training new principals. Many principal preparation programs currently utilize a practicum course structure where candidates choose a mentor to serve as a reference or support on pre-assigned tasks, either during coursework or during the practicum experience. These tasks are often not relevant to the candidate's school or setting, and this disconnect could contribute to feelings of inadequacy of new principals, dissatisfaction with principal preparation programs, and to the argument that principal preparation is disconnected from reality. Additionally, Augustine-Shaw and Reilly (2017) argued that these *buddy-type* mentorships, while typically well-intended, lack robust components that have meaningful impact on long-term development and often do not encourage reflective practice or include the training necessary to coach new principals. Consequently, Young (2019) argued that effective principal mentoring relationships could serve as a catalyst for on the job professional development and support the novice principal's ability to fulfill the expectations and professional responsibilities of their role.

Review of the Literature

Current Perspectives of School Leadership

While the notion of school leadership often encompasses activities undertaken by teachers, community groups, and site-based teams, Kafka (2009) contends school leadership usually refers to the work of the principal, and times have changed for those becoming principals. No longer do good management skills and a deep understanding of the school and community equate to an effective principal. Fleck (2008) argued today's principals are expected to be experts in all aspects of administration, leadership, and education. In several states, principals of underperforming schools may even be removed from their jobs (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012).

As research has revealed the effects leadership could have on student achievement, lawmakers and policymakers have gained an increasing interest in public education and the principal's role. Leading the way in the shift in the role of the principal to an instructional leader was the National Commission on Excellence in Education's (1983) report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* and a growing body of research on effective schools. In 2001, the federal government passed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 196. More recently, in 2015, NCLB was reauthorized as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). With the passage of these legislative acts, schools have become increasingly accountable for student achievement, and the principal's role has evolved to a new level of complexity.

Twenty-first century principals are charged with a substantial number of tasks. Duncan et al. (2011) asserted the principal position has expanded to encompass the roles of educational visionary, instructional and curriculum leader, assessment expert, disciplinarian, community builder, public relations and communication expert, budget analyst, facility manager, special programs administrator, as well as overseer of legal, contractual, and policy mandates. With the number and complexity of responsibilities bestowed on today's principals comes increased pressure to principals as well as the establishments who prepare them for the role.

Perhaps a more confusing topic than how to effectively prepare principals has been how to effectively evaluate them. Inconsistent definitions of principal effectiveness and role responsibilities have contributed to a wide variety of approaches to evaluating school leaders; however, educational accountability reform has generated much interest in the effectiveness of school leadership. Practitioners and researchers continue to explore the best ways to measure effective leadership (Pannell, White, & McBrayer, 2018).

According to Fuller & Hollingsworth (2014), little empirical research exists on principal evaluation, and as recently as 2010, few states had comprehensive evaluation systems for school leaders; however, to request flexibility from certain provisions of federal legislation, many states have developed principal evaluation systems that included student achievement data as a measure of principal evaluation (Canole & Young, 2013). While many states incorporate outcome data on high stakes student assessments in their current principal evaluation systems, the notion of measuring principal effectiveness with student achievement results remains a controversial issue. Proponents of using student outcome data as a means to evaluate school leaders argue that, while the principal may not directly impact student achievement scores, the workings of the principal impact many factors that could have a significant impact on student achievement (Clifford, Behrstock-Sherratt, & Fetters, 2012). Those who oppose using student outcome data as a means to evaluate the effectiveness of school leaders argue against the validity of measuring principal

effectiveness with student outcome data because these assessments were designed to measure student learning, not effective principal performance (Mendels, 2012). Additionally, these opponents argue the principal has only indirect control over many factors that affect student test scores and support the use of elements over which the principal has more direct control, such as effective leadership behaviors and practices, as a means of principal evaluation (Mendels, 2012; Spiro, 2013). Further, Piro, Wiemers, and Shutt (2011) argued against using student achievement scores for principal evaluation since many student populations are made up of children with similar demographic characteristics, thus rendering the generalizability of the results impractical. Despite the discrepancies, a growing body of research on principal effectiveness supports the use of high stakes student assessment data as a component of principal evaluation (Clifford et al., 2012; Clifford, Hansen, & Wraight, 2014; Grissom, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2015; Pannell et al., 2018).

Public School Accountability

Many consider the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), passed in 2001, a radical attempt at education reform. NCLB brought increased federal funding to lower socio-economic school districts in an attempt to close achievement gaps related to poverty. With this increased funding came a new level of accountability for student achievement in the form of standardized testing. States that received federal funds were required to develop a statewide student assessment system that included a mandatory testing program for elementary and secondary students. Students were to be assessed every year in both reading and math during grades three through eight, and once during their high school years. NCLB mandated students be assessed in science three times during their K-12 academic career, once in elementary school, once in middle school, and once in high school. Further, states were required to report disaggregate results of performance data, based on race and economic level subgroups, on these assessments.

Results from the mandatory statewide student testing program in one southern state served as the sole basis for the federal and state school accountability label. Every year, each student was assigned a label based on their performance on the mandatory state assessments for that year. Labels, in ascending order, were Advanced, Proficient, Basic, and Minimal. Schools were awarded points for each student scoring in the top three categories: three points for advanced, two points for Proficient, and one point for Basic. No points were awarded to the school for students scoring Minimal. In addition to the assigned label, student growth residuals based on the previous year's assessment were calculated for every student each year, and each student received a label related to growth: Met or Not Met. The state department of education assigned each school an accountability label based on a formula that calculated the school-wide student achievement scores in terms of percentage of students in each category and percentage of students meeting academic growth requirements.

Principal Preparation: Criticism and Change

The role of principal preparation programs is to equip participants with the knowledge and skills to meet the demands of school leadership roles (Duncan et al., 2011; Hernandez et al., 2012); however, educational leadership preparation views have changed faster than PPPs can keep up (Reed & Kinsler, 2010; Miller, 2013; Zubnzycki, 2013). Traditionally, college and university programs offered classes, which teachers aspiring to become principals could take at night, to learn to manage the day-to-day operations of a school building (Olson, 2007). The author noted classes were often

taught in isolation and accompanied by little to no practice at the skills being taught. Though the principal's role has changed, little has changed in principal preparation practices. Most university educational leadership programs still offer classes at night and/or on weekends for those who aspire to be principals, and these classes are often taught in isolation, accompanied by little to no practice at the skills being taught. Many principals feel traditional university preparation programs failed to adequately evaluate and revise programs to prepare them for the new, more complex principalship.

Research conducted over the past two decades revealed that nearly two-thirds of principals believe that traditional graduate leadership programs are out of touch with today's realities (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, & Orr, 2007; Farkas, Johnson, & Duffett, 2003; Guerra, Zamora, Hernandez, and Menchaca, 2017; Johnson, 2016). Lashway (1999) and Levine (2005) contended, university PPPs had low admission and graduation standards, irrelevant and insignificant coursework, and inadequate clinical instruction. Faculties of educational leadership programs have come under fire for lack of practical experience in the field, noting that only six percent of educational leadership faculty had principal experience and only two percent had served as superintendents (Pannell et al., 2015). This lack of experience leaves faculty ill-equipped to design relevant practical experiences for candidates thus leading to gaps between knowledge and practical application skills.

Further, the United States Department of Education's Office of Innovation and Improvement (OII) faulted PPPs for inadequate recruitment process leading to self-selection of leadership candidates, insufficient screening processes, poor linkages between theory and practice, and failure to connect the program to the individual's projected career path and administrative placement and setting (Sanzo, 2016).

The disconnect between how principals are trained and the realities of today's principalship is forcing colleges, universities, policy makers, departments of education, and school districts across the nation to reexamine leadership preparation programs. Principal preparation programs place too much emphasis on lecture and theory and not enough emphasis on application; therefore, it is critical that PPPs become more innovative in their preparation practices (Guerra et al., 2017). Many PPPs have adjusted coursework to align with the complexity of the principal's role, including courses that focus on instructional leadership and supervision, diversity, and stakeholder engagement. Still, these adjustments may not be enough to close the leadership gap without sufficient opportunities to apply the knowledge in a real-world school setting.

Effective Principal Preparation

Research in the field of educational leadership supports the notion that the capacity of school leaders is highly dependent on their leadership preparation experiences, and research has identified several components as essential to effective principal preparation. Critical components of effective PPPs include enhanced entrance criteria (Kearney & Valdez, 2015), university courses focused on instructional leadership (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012, Southern Regional Education Board, 2009), and support for aspiring leaders provided thorough cohort models (SREB, 2009) as well as support after graduation for practicing school leaders (Kearney & Valdez, 2015).

Perhaps the most crucial component of effective principal preparation is a partnership between universities and school districts. University-district partnerships allow districts to identify candidates with the potential to become the type of leaders needed to address educational deficits, and universities gain greater access to quality candidates and reduce wasted resources often associated with the self-selection process traditionally used in recruiting candidates (SREB, 2009).

Further, these partnerships allow for a more meaningful and authentic field-based experiences. Field-based experiences help candidates construct new knowledge, facilitate opportunities for reflection regarding practice, use real-world experiences within the school and community to help candidates link theory to practice, and have the greatest impact when incorporated continuously throughout the program based on course content (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). University-district partnerships afford mentors and university faculty the opportunity to work together to ensure field-based experiences are of high quality and include progressive opportunities to observe, participate in, and lead tasks relating to instructional improvement and school management (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Duncan et al., 2011; Guerra et al., 2017; Kearney & Valdez, 2015).

Current PPPs must find a systemic way to balance the transfer of knowledge gained through coursework with meaningful immersion in practice. A growing number of principal-preparation initiatives are forsaking university classrooms in favor of much more familiar training grounds: the schools and districts where those aspiring leaders will end up working (Pannell et al., 2015). Realizing the impact of field-based experiences on principal preparation some states, such as Georgia, have developed tiered levels of principal certification and increased the of required hours and types of acceptable field experience activities for the differing levels of principal certification. Other innovative preparation programs are replacing the traditional practicum experience with full-time internships to provide more authentic field-based experiences to aspiring principals.

Methodology

This pilot study investigated the relationship between the field experience structure of principal preparation programs (PPP) and instructional leadership preparedness. Specifically, it examined the relationship between field experience structure and principal licensure examination scores as well as the relationship between PPP field experience structure and principal impact on school-wide student achievement scores as measured by statewide standardized student assessment scores. The rationale for targeting this population is both groups completed principal preparation programs within the same university that offered identical courses yet differing field experience structures.

Participants

Participants in the study included principals from one southern state who served in a public school eligible to receive a state accountability rating and completed their educational leadership training at one southeastern university that housed two PPPs with differing field experience structures. Of the 61 total participants, 37 completed a 400-hour practicum during the entire length of the program in their current school while taking graduate coursework and maintaining their classroom teaching duties. Twenty-four participants completed a full-time fall semester internship and a full-time spring semester internship under different veteran principals at two schools while simultaneously completing graduate coursework. Both groups of principals completed the same instructional leadership coursework regardless of their field experience structure. Due to the manageable size of the population, no sample was chosen for this study. The statistical tests were conducted, and descriptive data were analyzed for the entire population.

Twenty-three participants were elementary school principals, 34 were secondary school principals, and four were principals of attendance centers, which serve kindergarten (K) through twelfth grade. The participant group in this study is highlighted in Table 1.

Table 1
Overview of Participants

Field Experience Structure	N	Elementary Principals	Secondary Principals	Attendance Center Principals
Practicum	37	12	22	3
Internship	24	11	12	1

Procedures

To identify participants relevant to the study, graduates were tracked through the university School of Education internal reports and the state department of education archived principals lists. Participants were assigned to one of two groups depending upon their PPP field experience structure. One group was comprised of graduates who completed practicum courses to satisfy field experience requirements for their educational leadership training. For this study, these participants are identified as Practicum Principals (PP). The other group consisted of graduates who completed an internship to satisfy field experience requirements for their educational leadership training and are identified as Internship Principals (IP).

Once the participants were identified, the researcher obtained permission to use principal licensure assessment data from each participant via an electronic consent form using Qualtrics and identified their school placements from the archived principals list provided by the state department of education for the relevant school year. The schoolwide student achievement scores (SA) for each participant's school for the years relevant to the study was collected from the public reports section of the state department of education website. The SA under the school's previous leadership was used as a baseline score, and SA differentials were calculated for each participant's first year in the principalship.

Descriptive statistical analysis of raw data was conducted and reported on participant SLLA scores, SA scores, and school-wide growth residuals. The nonparametric, Mann-Whitney U, test was conducted to determine if a difference in SLLA scores existed between the two groups. An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to determine if a difference in SA differentials existed between PPs and IPs in their first year in a principal role based on statewide student assessment results, and descriptive data were analyzed to examine growth residuals between principals whose schools met academic growth expectations and principals whose schools did not meet academic growth expectation as assessed by the statewide student assessment program.

The study was limited to the principals' first year in the principalship to reduce the risks of principal effectiveness being influenced by other factors not related to principal preparation and to gain a greater understanding of the impact of initial preparedness. It is also important to note SA differentials focus on growth rather than the actual SA score; therefore, participant measurements focused on positive and negative gains exclusive of the current school accountability label.

Results

An analysis of descriptive data revealed the two educational leadership programs produced a combined total of 163 graduates during the three-year timeframe of the study. Of the 134 graduates who completed a practicum, 39% (N = 53) moved into a district or school level administrator position while 97% (N = 28) of the 29 internship graduates moved into a district or school level leadership capacity. While no internship graduates (N = 0) returned to a classroom teacher position

upon completion of their PPP, 42% (N = 57) of practicum graduates remained in the classroom. Eighteen percent (N = 24) of graduates who completed a practicum left K-12 public education in the state compared to 3% (N = 1) of internship graduates. Follow-up with the IP who left K-12 education in the state revealed the participant had moved to an executive role in an alternate route teacher preparation program. Table 2 provides a breakdown of graduates' roles after completing their respective program.

Table 2
Overview of PPP Graduates Job Roles by Field Experience (FE) Structure

FE Structure	N	District Leader	School Leader	Teacher	Other
Practicum	134	7	46	57	24
Internship	29	2	26	0	1
Total	163	9	72	57	25

Note: The "other" category for each program is inclusive of guidance counselors, higher education employees, and graduates working outside of K-12 public education in the state.

Of the 61 graduates who had assumed a principal role in a K-12 school eligible to receive a state accountability rating based results from the state-wide assessment system, thirty PPs and 20 IPs granted permission for their SLLA scores to be used in the study for research question one, yielding 81.1% and 83.3% participations rates respectively. The range of SLLA scores for PPs was 20, with a high score of 189 and a low score of 169 while the range of scores for IPs was 42, with a high score of 193 and a low score of 151. Results from an independent samples *t*-test indicated IPs (M = 178.75, SD = 9.037) scored 3.55 points higher than PPs (M = 175.20, SD = 4.831) on the SLLA.

An inspection of boxplots revealed six outliers in PP SLLA scores and one outlier in IP SLLA scores. All outliers were included in the statistical analysis as they were considered an accurate representation of the participants' instructional leadership preparedness as assessed by the SLLA. Further, results of the Shapiro-Wilk's test of normality (see table 3) revealed SLLA scores were not normally distributed in either group.

Table 3
Shapiro-Wilk Test of Normality Results for SLLA Scores

		Shapiro-Wilk		
	Field Experience Structure	Statistic	df	Sig.
SLLA SCORE	Practicum	.821	30	.000*
	Internship	.896	20	.034*

Note: * indicates significance resulting in violation of normality

Due to the presence of outliers and violations of normality, a Mann-Whitney U test was run to determine if there were differences in SLLA score between PP and IPs because it is less sensitive to outliers and violations of normality that the independent samples *t*-test (Bors, 2018). Distributions of the SLLA scores for PPs and IPs were similar, as assessed by visual inspection of the population pyramid. School Leadership Licensure Assessment score was significantly higher in

IPs (*Mdn* = 180.50) than in PPs (*Mdn* = 174.00), $U = 145$, $z = 2.117$, $p = .034$; therefore, the null hypothesis that the distribution of SLLA score is the same between PPs and IPs must be rejected.

Research question two explored principal impact on school-wide student achievement levels by exploring SA differentials based on the state-wide student assessments, using the previous administration's SA score as a baseline, and academic growth as assessed by the state accountability model, based on student growth residuals from students' prior assessment scores.

For first year measurements in SA differentials, there were 37 PPs and 24 IPs. The maximum gain in SA points of a first-year PP was (+)42 points while the greatest gain for a first-year IP was (+)27 points. The largest negative impact on SA of a first-year PP was (-)35 points while the largest negative impact on SA for a first-year IP was (-)29 points.

In their initial year in the principalship, PPs' *M* SA differentials ($M = 7.35$, $SD = 14.917$) were higher than internship principals' *M* SA differentials ($M = 2.42$, $SD = 11.695$). Schoolwide Student Achievement Score differentials for each field experience structure were normally distributed, as assessed by Shapiro-Wilk test ($p > .05$), and there was homogeneity of variance, as assessed by Levene's test for equality of variances ($p = .176$). Table 4 presents an overview of SA differentials for PPs and IPs, respectively, for their first year in the principalship.

Table 4
Schoolwide Student Achievement Scores (SA) Differentials by Field Experience (FE) Structure

FE Structure		*N*	range	*M*	SD
Practicum	YR 1	37	77	7.35	14.917
Internship	YR 1	24	56	2.42	11.695

Results from an *independent samples t*-test revealed PPs' *M* SA differential was 4.935 (*SE* = 3.604) points higher than internship principals' *M* SA differential in the first year in a principal role. Despite the higher *M* SA differential, there is no statistically significant difference in the *M* SA differential at the significance level of .05. The results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5
Independent t-Test Results for Year 1 SA Differential

SA Differential	*t*	*df*	Sig.	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% CI Lower Bound	95% CI Upper Bound
Equal Variances Assumed	1.369	59	.176	4.935	3.604	-2.277	12.146

Note: The mean difference is significant at the .05 level

Further inspection of statewide accountability reports revealed that schools led by IPs met growth on the statewide accountability model at a greater rate than schools led by PPs, 83.3% and 75.7% respectively. Table 6 presents school-wide growth residual results.

Table 6
School-wide Growth Residuals by Field Experience (FE) Structure

FE Structure	N	Met Growth	Did Not Meet Growth
Practicum	37	28	9

Internship	24	20	4

Discussion

The role of the principal in United States public schools has changed dramatically over the past few decades. The primary role of today's principal is to be an instructional leader for the school rather than a building manager, as they once were. With a vast body of research supporting the impact of school leadership on student achievement (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Lynch, 2012; Marzano et al., 2005; Mendels & Mitgang, 2013; Miller 2013; Reames, 2010) it is imperative for principals to be knowledgeable of sound instructional practices and well equipped to balance a wide array of tasks and still maintain focus on teaching and learning. Past research indicates training programs have failed to keep pace with the evolving principal's role (Duncan et al., 2011; Fleck, 2008; Hernandez et al., 2012; Lashway, 2003; Lashway, 1999; Levine, 2005; Lynch, 2012; Miller, 2013; Reed & Kinsler, 2010; Zubnzycki, 2013), and the debate concerning the design of PPPs is expected to continue well beyond this study.

The findings of this study highlighted a discrepancy in the percentages of PPP graduates who completed a full-time internship and entered into the field of educational leadership compared to PPP graduates who completed practicum courses as part of their program of study. Nearly all of the graduates who completed a full-time internship as part of their training moved into school and/or district level leadership positions. The one internship graduate who did not transition into a school or district leadership role moved into a leadership position for Teach for America (TFA), an alternative teacher preparation entity. Conversely, more than half (60%) of the graduates who completed a part-time practicum failed to move into a school or district leadership role within three years of graduation. These findings align with previous research that suggests PPPs that utilize practicum courses could encounter greater wastes in resources when considering educational leadership program missions to prepare leaders who can affect change in schools (Pannell et al., 2015). According to the authors, most PPPs fail to provide meaningful clinical instruction, and surveys revealed that 89% of PPP alumni felt inadequately prepared to deal with the realities of the job. McBrayer, Chance, Pannell, and Wells (2018) defined school leaders' self-efficacy as "self-assessment of one's perceived capability to organize and implement action required to effectively lead organizational change to achieve a performance outcome". The traditional university structure could be contributing to leadership shortages experienced by many rural and urban schools by failing to provide opportunities for meaningful immersion in practice thus perpetuating a lack of leadership self-efficacy amongst their graduates. At the very least, traditional PPPs must focus on *readiness* in their preparation of aspiring administrators and ensure they provide meaningful experiences with ample opportunity for practical immersion. Meaningful practical experiences, combined with rigorous and relevant coursework, has the potential to increase candidates' school leader's self-efficacy and combat principal shortages in America's underserved communities.

Albritton and Stacks (2016) noted that engaging students in their learning process presents challenges at all levels of education, including higher education settings which are often criticized for not supporting authenticity and relevancy in the learning process. The authors contended when students have the opportunity to connect theory to practice, they reap many of the cognitive benefits of engaged pedagogies including deeper levels of critical thinking, problem solving, reasoning, elaboration strategies, metacognition strategies, and skill transfer. These cognitive abilities are essential for passing the school leadership licensure assessments required by states to obtain principal certification. In this study, principals who completed a year-long, full-time internship

scored significantly higher on the state school leadership licensure assessment than principals who completed a part-time practicum, indicating immersion in practice might better prepare educational leadership candidates for their licensure exams.

Further, the findings of this study revealed both, practicum courses and full-time internships, to be effective in preparing school principals to effect positive gains in student achievement. Principals who completed practicum courses experienced more than three times the gains in student achievement in their first year in the principalship than principals who completed a full-time internship; however, internship principals met school-wide growth residuals at a 7.6% higher rate than PPs.

The results of this study suggest the field experience structure may not be as critical for instructional leadership preparedness as the type of activities candidates are engaged in. The attainment of knowledge for initial licensure and the acquisition of skills for application in the field for successful leadership are both critical pieces PPPs must focus on to improve and enhance educational leadership programs. Innovative and effective leadership preparation holds a level of practical significance that needs to be addressed.

Recommendations for Future Research

Research has established a strong connection between school leadership and student achievement in our nation's schools, and because our schools are not performing at expected levels, PPPs have come under fire from critics and policymakers. Although the results of this study indicate multiple field experience structures can effectively prepare aspiring principals, a focus on improvement efforts could result in the production of higher quality school leaders and an even greater impact on student achievement. Recommendations for future research to assist PPPs in preparing effective school leaders include continued evaluation of field-based experience structures and qualitative follow-ups to gain insight into the type of field experience activities graduates found most beneficial in preparing them for the principal's role. Research efforts could build upon this study to identify demographic information of schools contained in the study and gain more insight on the impacts on student achievement of varying field experience structures as well as conducting similar research studies longitudinally over time as the two educational leadership programs continue to produce graduates who are serving as principals. Further, qualitative research could help gain insight into the effectiveness of the many components of existing principal preparation programs by hearing from the voice of the participants about their experiences.

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