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PREPARING ASPIRING SCHOOL PRINCIPALS: ONE FIELD-BASED APPROACH

Article by Maria de Lourdes Viloria, Lori Leyendecker, Graciela Brondo, and Michael Salinas

Abstract

In the United States, principals play a vital role in leading educational institutions. School principals are responsible for creating safe and supportive learning environments for all students. Previous studies have emphasized that all principals share one challenge, which is to identify effective instructional strategies that help decrease student achievement gaps. Studies of novice school principals are well-documented; it is also well-acknowledged that the acclimatization process for novice school principals is characterized with a high level of stress related to the organizational structures that influence the school's culture and climate and student achievement. This study addresses the implementation of a field-based approach utilized by a principal preparation program to provide principal candidates an opportunity to connect theory with practice and expand their understanding of novice principals' daily responsibilities. To that end, this work serves aspiring principal candidates in their transition from the classroom into a leadership role. Furthermore, this field-based experience informs aspiring principals about novice school principals' daily responsibilities.

Keywords: leadership, novice, principal, school, teacher

Introduction

In the United States schools, principals' data-driven decisions play a vital role in leading educational institutions that create safe and supportive learning environments for all students. Successful principals ensure teachers are implementing instructional strategies that meet diverse students' academic achievement (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Louis et al., 2010). In fact, researchers agree that school principals' greatest challenge is identifying effective instructional strategies to decrease the achievement gap for underrepresented, underserved, and underprepared students of color (Murdock et al., 2003; Spillane & Lee, 2014). Therefore, it is imperative that university-based principal preparation programs dedicate a portion of the required curriculum to field-based

application of leadership theories that increase aspiring principal candidates' acclimation, cultural, interpersonal knowledge (Duncan et al., 2011). The focus of this article is to share one university-based principal preparation program's strategy that provides aspiring principals with a field-based experience aimed at expanding their understanding of novice principals' experience.

Literature Review

Effective school principals creatively summon and channel the collaborative efforts of parents, and teachers to achieve student learning (Wallace Foundation, 2012). According to Spiro (2013), "principals also know how to exploit data for sound decision making" (p. 4). Educational leadership researchers agree that principal preparation programs need to expose principal candidates to the realities and fundamental dilemmas of the principal's role (Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Spillane & Lee, 2013). In the same fashion, researchers also caution that although a large portion of principal candidates' learning is based on their interpretation and application of leadership theories, it is also equally important to highlight that not one campus assignment is the same (Schulz et al., 2016). Schulz et al. further elaborated: "schools are distinctive organizations because of the children they serve, and therefore, require leadership unique to the needs of schools" (p. 2). According to research conducted by Branch et al. (2012), students' educational outcomes can be directly linked to a principal's effectiveness, measured by student achievement and value-added. Therefore, principal candidates' prescriptive preparation for success as school principals is virtually impossible since no two campuses are the same. Another key point is that the ideal system for addressing the student achievement gaps is by closing the teaching gap and creating "a more meaningful system that would use classroom data and feedback from peers and principals in ways that are much more focused on how to teach specific content to particular students" (Darling-Hammond, 2015, p. 6). In that case, a greater emphasis needs to be placed on ensuring that aspiring principal candidates have field-based experiences that connect leadership theory to real "problems of practice" (Spillane & Lee, 2014, p. 456). Relatedly, it is important to realize that policies and practices of instructional leaders influence teacher leaders in schools and ultimately impact student achievement. Relatedly, principal preparation programs that have put this recommendation into practice find that aspiring principal candidates find the transition from the assistant principal role into the principalship less challenging (Schulz et al., 2016). Moreover, based on educational leadership researchers' recommendations, the intent of this article is to share the findings of one university-based principal preparation program's strategy to provide aspiring school principals with an acclimation experience by providing them with a field-based experience via their interviews of novice school principals (Cheney et al., 2010; Mendels, 2016).

Methods

Data Collection

The data for this article came from a qualitative study of three South Texas novice school principals. Participants for this study were selected via purposeful sampling. For this particular study, three novice school principals were the focus of this research. A purposeful sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994) of local university-based principal preparation program alumni was used. At the time of the study, all three participants were novice school principals, which is defined as school leaders having three years or less years of practice in their current campus assignment. Participants included one high school principal and two middle school assistant principals. The participants participated in at least two semi-structured interviews lasting 45 to 90 minutes and conducted at their place of employment (Gall et al., 2003). The semi-structured interviews were not audio-recorded but transcribed for accuracy. The interview questions were organized in four areas: participants' educational goals, students' college readiness skills, social justice leadership, and culturally responsive leadership practices.

Data Analysis

Once the semi-structured interviews were concluded, the research team, which consisted of three graduate students and the professor, analyzed the data. The researchers read each of the participants' transcripts looking for emerging themes (Denzin, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each of the researchers wrote a summary of the emerging themes that were reviewed by one other researcher to avoid bias (Denzin, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Three themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) participants' culturally responsive leadership style, (b) prioritizing students' academic needs, and (c) teacher mentoring. Each participant was given a pseudonym and all data were coded for analysis.

Table 1: Profiles of Novice School Principals

PSEUDONYM	LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE	TEACHING & GRADE EXPERIENCE
Julio	Second-Year Principal	8 years as a High School Social Studies Teacher

Iris	Third-Year Middle School Assistant Principal	5 years as a Speech, Study Skills Teacher
Vanessa	Third-Year Middle School Assistant Principal	5 years as a High School Social Studies Teacher

Findings

The focus of this article is to share one university-based principal preparation program's strategy used to provide aspiring principals with a field-based experience aimed at expanding their understanding of novice principals' experience and responsibilities. Therefore, researchers conducted two novice school principal interviews for this study. The goal of the interviews was to expose aspiring principals with a real-life, first-hand perspective of the realities faced by novice school principals. Accordingly, the focus of this university-based experience was to expose aspiring principals to the application of leadership theories learned in the educational administration program's curriculum and to see those leadership theories applied in a real-life setting. Overall, this experience informed aspiring principals' expectations about the type of educational leadership role that they hope to fulfill in the future. Moreover, via this field-based experience, aspiring principals gained an in-depth personal understanding of the many responsibilities that the principal role entail (Author, 2017). The data analysis revealed three themes: culturally responsive leadership, prioritizing students' academic needs, and teacher mentoring. This case study's results are presented in a descriptive narrative format for the readers' review.

Participants' Culturally Responsive Leadership

School principals' intent is to make decisions that offer individual students the assurance that their ethnicity, socio economic status, and/or gender will not interfere with their access to an equitable education (Johnson & Fuller, 2014). In the following example, one of the participants, Vanessa ((Vanessa, personal communication, 8-8-2017) exemplified this trait in her daily work as a middle school assistant principal:

I believe my leadership style is to lead by example. I will not ask teachers to do anything I am not willing to do. At times, I dive right into a task with teachers. I also believe in giving everyone the same opportunities and treating everyone fairly. I make it known that I understand no one is perfect but we need to strive to reach as close as we can to perfection. Teachers know that if they do what is being requested of them and the

campus/department expectations are being met, I will not bother them. But if they do not meet deadlines, do not turn in lesson plans, phone logs, or miss meetings then there will be a conversation with me and they will be given an opportunity to remedy the situation. I also make sure they know I have an open-door policy and they know I prefer to help them out with any issue they might have immediately. I always explain to them that bad news do not get better with time.

Culturally responsive principals respect students' diversity and encourage individual students to follow suit and enhance their education by believing in themselves and taking ownership of their learning potential through sociopolitical consciousness to dismantle social inequities and cultural norms (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2013; Yosso, 2005). Additionally, according to Johnson (2006), "school leaders also need models of how they might challenge the status quo of inequitable assessment practices, incorporate students' cultural knowledge into the school curriculum, and work with parents and community activists for social change in the larger community" (p. 33). In that case, the daily challenges of culturally responsive school leaders can be unsurmountable and not only focused in the academic areas, as Iris (Iris, personal communication, August 8, 2017) explained:

I think sometimes we forget that we are here for the students and we need to advocate for them. We stress the importance of acting accordingly and respectfully. No name-calling, bullying, and this is something we stress from the first day of school. It comes down to making good choices. We strive to provide students with rigorous quality instruction that is applicable to the real world. We can refer students to social programs that help support their family needs as well as the students' individual needs (free eyeglasses, food, and medical services).

Iris comments remind the reader that although there have been many studies that have focused on culturally responsive leadership, this study contributes to the discourse of principal preparation because it presents the voices of three Mexican American novice school principals (Khalifa et al., 2016). Few studies have solely focused on capturing the experiences of Mexican American novice school principals who work along the U.S.-Mexico border (DeMatthews, 2018). Mexican American novice school principals focus on a constant self-analysis of their interpretation of conventional normalized institutional scripts (Ishimaru, 2018) associated with schooling in the United States. That is as represented by their informative quotes—their self-interrogation is part of a self-check practice—to not fall into a normalized structure of leadership practices that fail to meet the unique cultural needs of diverse learners along the US-Mexico border.

Prioritizing Students' Academic Needs

According to Day et al. (2016), a principal's effectiveness and the success of their campus is based on their "diagnosis of the school's needs and their application of clearly articulated, organizationally shared educational values through multiple combinations and accumulations of time and context sensitive strategies that are 'layered' and progressively embedded in the school's work, culture, and achievements"

(p. 222). Furthermore, the key to embedding a school climate and a culture of success is contingent on the principal's leadership skills focused on creating collaborative organizational learning structures for students' academic success (Hallinger & Heck, 2011). The following data collected from one of the participants, Julio demonstrates the constant stress placed on making data-driven decisions while at the same time taking steps towards increasing teachers' capacity:

While it is true that the local, state, and federal accountability systems have been in constant flux over the last two years, one thing has remained consistent even within the ever-changing accountability system. Our school's focus on the underrepresented, underserved, and underprepared child has been consistent. Whether it be the federal accountability system or the state accountability system there have been standards in place that have kept educators focused on these groups. The newest practice that we have to accommodate now is tying state teachers' evaluation systems to student growth and use that measure to evaluate the teacher's performance.

According to Grissom et al. (2015), "measuring principal performance using student test scores no doubt faces many of the same difficulties as measuring teacher performance using test scores" (p. 6). However, it is a known fact that this practice is part of each principal's annual evaluation. So what are principals supposed to do? For the purposes of the present study, Julio, Vanessa, and Iris concurred that the path to achieving gains in student achievement is getting to know the individual academic needs of each student. The following reflections summarize their thoughts.

Vanessa's self-described advocacy for individual students' academic needs is remarkable and an example of culturally responsive leadership and administrative practices that ignite and motivate students' learning (Edmonds, 1979; Nieto, 2013). Vanessa explains:

As a school, we are constantly looking at data, individual student data identifies areas that need improvement or that are not meeting accountability mandates. We try to include innovations in instructional practices that target individual student achievement gaps. We accommodate these practices through professional development opportunities for teachers and collaborative meetings throughout the year. We have to remember we are the advocates for our students, we need to lobby for each one. We need to make sure none fall through the cracks.

In contrast, Iris stresses the relevance of administrative practices focused on promoting the academic achievement of underrepresented, underserved, and underprepared Hispanic students (Murdock et al., 2003; Spillane & Lee, 2014). Iris argues:

Foundational skills such as reading, writing and more importantly, English language speaking are the building blocks for individual students' educational success. At our campus we work with many students that come from low-socioeconomic statuses upbringings and about half of the student population are English Language Learners (ELLs). Therefore, using individual student data to identify their academic needs is one

of the more important educational goals because we look to prepare all types of students for their next level of education, which is high school. Many students come into our school already lacking so many of the basic skills and we feel that we should do our best to send them off to high school on the right note.

Additionally, Julio highlights the interconnectedness of students' academic achievement, cultural, and linguistic knowledge with the access to financial stability and life-long skills necessary to maximize their learning potential and autonomy in today's world (Nichols & Valenzuela, 2013; Yosso, 2005). Julio asserts:

First, and foremost it is promoting foundational skills like math, reading and English. We have students who come to school at different cognitive and skill levels. I believe that knowing the individual students' academic and cultural needs helps us identify who needs to be taught the basics so we can assure that each child will be able to function in our ever-advancing technological society. For a first-generation Mexican American student, a high school diploma does not help students economically the way it did 40 years ago. In fact, a high school diploma will leave most students living at or slightly above the poverty line. Therefore, getting these students college ready is a necessity rather than an option in today's economy.

In essence, along the U.S.-Mexico border, Mexican American school leaders' actions positively impact diverse students' academic achievement because they prioritize the students' cultural needs and understand their borderlands context (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2020; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Teacher Mentoring

In relation to teachers, principals need to be highly skilled in the hiring process. Novice teacher mentoring can address the daily operational skills of the teaching profession. However, content knowledge, lesson planning, and instructional delivery are not professional skills that a new hire can learn overnight. Relatedly, a principal's poor choice can be highly detrimental to students' learning and campus success (Engel, 2013). Researchers have concluded that teaching experience is one of the most important characteristics linked to teacher effectiveness (Harris & Sass, 2011). Unfortunately, principals of hard-to-staff schools do not have the luxury of hiring experienced teachers so they must rely on peer mentoring and professional development to build teachers' capacity and self-efficacy (Achinstein et al., 2010). Fortunately, the campuses where these three novice principals work are located in South Texas, where teachers of color have historically seen education as a means to social and educational equity (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2020; Flores et al., 2007). In this case, the voices of these three Mexican American novice school principals reinforce their commitment to mentoring teachers.

Julio understands the important relationship between teachers' professional growth, and student achievement. He provides professional growth opportunities for teachers:

I believe in the professional development for teachers. It is well-documented that the number one thing students need to learn is a good teacher. It is incumbent upon us to train the teachers and consistently offer professional development that help teachers reach more students, particularly those with learning difficulties such as special education, English language learners, and economically disadvantaged students. In relation to teacher mentoring, the new teacher evaluation system is all about teacher growth. It is a growth-based model evaluation system. The system asks teachers to focus on two goals for improving and the teacher and administrator work together to help the teacher reach their goal.

In that respect, Iris accentuates the significance of supporting teachers in their daily work:

We are currently focusing on increasing reading comprehension campus-wide. We want and need to see improvement in the quantity and quality of students' skills. We continue to keep a pulse on our teachers and students. Approximately 50% of our population is ELL; approximately 13% of our population is Special Ed. It is imperative that we are progress monitoring at all times and for all our students. However, these subgroups need quite a bit of individual attention in the classroom and teachers need administrative support. In turn, teachers know who their students are, what their needs are, and how those individual academic needs must be met.

Furthermore, Vanessa integrates data-driven decisions and collaborative professional learning communities as strategies to build teacher capacity and peer mentoring (DuFour, 2011).

By providing teachers with observational data, which includes walk-throughs, constructive feedback, and asking teachers to self-reflect on lessons, the administrative team can see how student and teacher interaction is monitored, and measured. Ultimately, active student engagement leads to increased student learning. We have a school wide initiative for professional learning communities. Administrators facilitating these communities seek innovative instructional strategies to close individual student achievement gaps.

Discussion

The overarching goal of this study was to provide aspiring school principals with a real-world experience of what principals face on a daily basis, especially novice school principals. Our hope was to use this field-based experience and strengthen aspiring principals' range of leadership attributes. Eventually, one day these three aspiring principal-researchers will be able to lead a campus, and be successful and continue see the diversity of students' demographics as assets within the U.S.-Mexico borderlands context. Students' academic success is always an important aspect in the field of education. Principals need to have a positive attitude in relation to students' cultural differences in order to create a learning environment that will promote the critical thinking necessary to support social change. In this case, the goal of the principal

preparation programs should be to provide future principal candidates with a field-based approach to understanding the principalship. The field-based approach should go beyond the required field-based practicum by allowing principal candidates to meet and interview real principals in the field.

Limitations

Due to the limited sample size, the data sample analysis only represents the perceptions of the novice school principals who participated in this study. In addition, the researchers' intent was not to generalize the findings of this case study.

Conclusion

As was stated at the beginning of this article, it is imperative that university-based principal preparation programs dedicate a portion of the required curriculum to field-based application of leadership theories (Duncan et al., 2011). This article shared one university-based principal preparation program's strategy that provides aspiring principals with a field-based experience which exposes them to the actual roles and responsibilities of a school principal.

According to the researcher who interviewed Iris, she had a wonderful and worthwhile experience: "I felt I had the front row seat in all the action. She introduced me to her principal and other colleagues which provided me with some networking opportunities." In addition, the researcher who interviewed Julio added the following thoughts:

I realized that a principal's daily routines are near non-existence due to constant interruptions. Either the phone rang, the secretary entered, or other individuals approached his office throughout our meeting. Never turning anyone away, we ended up completing half of the survey questions, and scheduled yet another meeting. I have learned significant amounts of information about leadership and how leadership is not just about showing people how energetic, and enthusiastic you are. Leaders have the ability to gain co-workers' trust, knowledge, and wisdom to move individuals and educational visions from uncertainty to excellence.

The researchers believe that aspiring principals have much to gain from this opportunity to see principals in action via a researcher's lens. The following quote best summarizes this thought:

Overall, this experience has built up my expectations towards the type of educational leadership role that I hope to fulfill in the future. Having this opportunity allowed me to get an in-depth and personal understanding of what some of the many duties that administrators' roles entail. I hope to take from this and build up my range of attributes to one day be able to lead at a campus, no matter the types of demographics they may exhibit. Student success is always an important aspect in the field of education and it is something that I will be sure to add to when I get my administrative opportunity.

In conclusion, the researchers' intent for this article is to encourage more principal preparation programs to embed field-based experiences into their programs in addition to the required practicum experience.

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