School Districts and a University Principal Preparation Program Partnership: A Cohort Model

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SCHOOL DISTRICTS AND A UNIVERSITY PRINCIPAL PREPARATION PROGRAM PARTNERSHIP

A Cohort Model

Article by Alejandro Garcia, Velma Menchaca, George Padilla, and Federico Guerra

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to discover the perceived benefits and challenges of preparing principal candidates for school district/university partnerships. Data analysis from focus group interviews revealed both benefits and challenges. Themes that were perceived as benefits were: 1) increased opportunities for graduate students in educational leadership preparation programs, 2) integration of field-based experiences, 3) a supportive learning environment, and 4) networking opportunities. Conversely, challenging themes were: 1) need for school district liaison, 2) better collaboration between school district/university partnerships, 3) employment consideration for graduates of educational leadership preparation programs, and 4) better school facilities and equipment. The study concluded that school district/university partnerships are needed in order to connect theory and practice to develop well-rounded educational leaders.

Keywords

1. Principal Preparation Programs

2. District/University Partnerships

3. Higher Education

Introduction

American public schools have been widely criticized for the poor quality of their educational programs (Price, 2004). As a result of these criticisms, educator preparation programs have been searching for new ways to provide significant experiences that

incorporate educational theory and practice. One effective suggested method in the training of teachers and principals is the collaboration of educator preparation institutions and public schools (Moore, 1989). The binding agent for a school district/university partnership is the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) which is mutually agreed upon contract that outlines the collaborative nature of the partnerships between school districts and the university.

School district/university partnerships have been instrumental to the development of successful educators. The school district and the university collaboratively assume responsibility to ensure effective delivery of a principal preparation program characterized by a rigorous curriculum. This rigorous curriculum is coupled with relevant field-based experiences designed to prepare culturally responsive, transformative school leaders. School district/university partnerships work closely to link theory into practice (Dever, Hager, & Klein, 2003) as indicated in a study on partnerships. These partnerships have created strong bonds that kept "faculty abreast of the realities of teaching in our nation's public schools" (Dever et al., 2003, p. 246). Secondly, they enable faculty to see first-hand "the joys and challenges of public-school teaching and consequently, build a greater understanding and appreciation of public-school teachers" (p. 246). Thirdly, solid partnerships allow for better communication between public schools and universities leading to mutual understandings of their roles in educator preparation programs.

At Riverside University (pseudonym), the Department of Leadership (pseudonym) had created leadership development partnerships with six school districts within its geographic boundary. The primary purpose of these partnerships was to develop and enhance the leadership effectiveness of prospective leaders. A unique feature of these university/school partnerships is the strong collaboration between the Department of Leadership faculty and school district personnel in integrating rigorous and relevant field-based experiences pertinent to specific school district needs. Course assignments are intentionally related to school district policies, data, and programs. Completion of coursework leads to a master's degree in Educational Leadership. Students can then continue and take coursework for the principal certification. All courses are aligned to state and national principal standards.

Purpose Statement

The Department of Leadership principal preparation program at Riverside University (pseudonym) created school district/university partnerships with six area school districts as a response to developing and enhancing leadership effectiveness for prospective leaders in these predominately Latino schools. The purpose of this study is to uncover the potential advantages and challenges for the district/university collaborative partnerships as perceived by the graduate students enrolled in the school districts' cohorts.

Problem of the Study

American schools have been broadly critiqued for the quality of their educational programs (Adler, 1988). As a result of these critiques, educator preparation programs have attempted to reinvent themselves with forward practices that provide more relevant experiences which incorporate modern educational theories and best practices. One method that has been suggested is the incorporation of collaboration between educational preparation programs and school districts (Moore, 1989). Goodlad (1994) echoed this by stating that, "what is needed is the 'simultaneous renewal' of both schools and teacher education practice" (p. 123). A study conducted by the Holmes Group (1995) supported this notion for clinical professors to bridge the gap between theory and practice, while collaborating with schools, and that such a collaboration would significantly contribute to the field of teaching and learning. The Holmes Groups was a consortium of research universities and professional education programs created to strengthen professional schools (Holmes Group, 1995). In addition, several studies (Blair, 2004; National Center for Education Information, 2004; Young, 2003) found that universities are not meeting the expectations of preparing future school leaders and that some states are moving away from university-based administrative credential programs to alternative certification routes.

Similarly, The National Commission for the Advancement of Educational Leadership (NCAELP), made recommendations for the improvement of higher education's role in school leadership programs which included "university-stakeholder partnerships, program content and delivery, program evaluation and accountability" (Hull, 2003, p. 14). The NCAELP's recommendations called for changes to take place in the way public school leaders were being prepared. Furthermore, it called for school district and universities to form partnerships in the preparation of educational leaders with an increase in professional development of practicing school leaders (Young & Petersen, 2002).

As a response to NCAELP, some universities have begun to develop partnerships with local school districts. The focus of these partnerships has been to develop better school leaders by providing a stronger preparation program which includes more relevant experiences (Whitaker & Barnett, 1999). Hoyle (2004) agreed in the necessity of such collaborations and asserts that universities should work closely with school districts in the selection of their students, in collaboration with their leadership curricula, and in analysis of the districts' data. Such activities have been noted by Kottkamp's (2003) study where Hofstra University's educational leadership program became deeply involved with a local school district. The "...partner district leaders participated in classes that convened in the school district with real district problems becoming part of the curriculum" (p. 19). Course assignments are intentionally related to districts data, policies, and programs. Also, Hale and Moorman (2003) concluded that the development of successful school leaders required a strong collaborative effort between higher education leadership preparation programs and local Pk-12 school districts, and that such partnerships included the necessary knowledge, skills and proficiencies for leading today's schools.

Review of Literature

Professional development schools (PDS) began to flourish following the first Holmes Group report in 1986. Since the Holmes Group recommendations, several hundred PDSs emerged in the 1990s. Shortly after, NCATE initiated a project to develop PDS standards. These innovative partnerships were designed to bring renewal to schools and education programs (Teitel, 2001). These partnerships were created with four goals in mind: 1) the improvement of student learning; 2) preparation of educators; 3) professional development of educators; and 4) research and inquiry into improving practice (Teitel, 2001). Day (1998) suggested that partnerships form around ideology (the search for like minds), generativity (the search to produce new knowledge), or capacity building (the search to create change through sustained interaction).

Most recently, school district/university partnerships were created to provide intensive clinical preparation to teacher or principal candidates and create a bridge between academia and the school districts. These school partnerships or educational partnerships refer to relationships between school districts and universities that draw upon equitable and shared relationships that plan, implement, and evaluate joint initiatives designed to better meet the education needs of teachers and students (Brookhart & Loadman, 1992; Clark, 1988; Feldman, 1992; Hord, 1986). These school district/university partnerships are not uni-dimensional projects; there are a variety of partnership types that have, among other differences, different structures, goals, and contexts (Barnett, Hall, Berg, & Camarena, 1999).

Partnerships are created to ensure alignment between academic and field experiences. In addition, working closely with public schools keeps university faculty abreast of the realities of teaching and leadership in our nation's public schools. The National School Board Association noted that a partnership consists of two or more parties that share common goals that cannot be reached by either party independently (Barnett et al., 1999). Goodlad (1994) indicated that "a school-university partnership represents a formal agreement between a college or university (or one of its constituent parts) and one or more school districts to collaborate on programs in which both have a common interest" (pp. 113-114).

The aim of these partnerships is to develop feelings of collegiality and connectedness between public school personnel and university-based educators to engage in work that both parties' value and own (Bullough, Draper, Smith, & Birrell, 2004). Also, the intent of collaborative efforts is to form partnerships that equally benefit both partners' vested interests while simultaneously sharing valuable resources (Trubowitz & Longo, 1997). Collaboration, communication, and collegiality are essential in creating the desired outcomes of university/public school partnerships (Knight, Wiseman, & Cooner, 2000). Communication, the effective transmittal of information within a relationship, is essential in a university/public school partnership. Without it, each partner may be unaware of the demands and needs of the other.

Partnerships between school districts/universities are one innovative response to address the need for improvement in the focus and effectiveness of professional development for educators. As educational partnership projects involve more than the

imparting of knowledge and the earning of degrees, this study includes an examination of the project history, background, practices, and lessons learned from the perspective of the participants from the school district in an educational partnership with a university.

Many of these school district/university partnerships have come to be known as grow-your-own efforts. Features of these programs include use of cohort models, district input on selection of candidates, jointly designed curriculum and instruction, on-site delivery of courses, formal mentoring, and the use of practitioners-scholars as instructors in the program (Whitaker & Barnett, 1999).

Callahan and Martin (2007) identified four distinct sets of characteristics that emerged from assessing two partnerships. The first characteristic was the nature of participation within the partnerships. Interaction and collaboration between the two partners formed a bonding relationship. The second characteristic was the mode of learning in which participants engaged in continuous learning. Learning and constant reflection were fostered between the partners. The third characteristic was the nature of communicative decision-making that occurred within the partnerships. Decision-making was either conducted jointly or independently. This characteristic can be compared to the organizational learning concept of knowledge systems, which focus on patterns of communication that create information-based systems. Finally, the fourth characteristic is associated with the nature of change patterns within the partnership. The concept of change patterns is most closely associated with the organizational learning concept of adaptation. Adaptation is concerned with the ways in which social systems adapt to their environments (Callahan & Martin, 2007, pp. 141-142).

Tushnet (1993) found that the structure and planning of partnerships between schools and universities differ in each case and may relate to the goals of the partnership. He identified three types of partnerships. Primary or limited partnerships which involve a "managing partner with other organizations providing services either to it or to clients" (p. 6). Coalition partnerships which exist when participating organizations divide the labor in order to seek common goals. The third type, collaborative partnerships, occurs when equal partners divide both labor and decision-making on a continuous basis.

CREATING A PARTNERSHIP

In 2013, Riverside University (pseudonym) approached a nearby school district about beginning a school district/university partnership where a cohort of teachers would be created to begin a master's degree. The purpose of the partnership was to develop and enhance leadership effectiveness of prospective educational leaders.

Administrators from the school district and faculty from the university attended the first meeting to introduce the goals and objectives of the newly created partnership. The superintendent challenged the university to offer all classes for the master's degree in the school district instead of at the university campus. After receiving approval from The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), the partnership team began meeting regularly. After this initial meeting, the school

district began to nominate potential school leaders for the cohort. These teachers applied to the Graduate School and the department. Nine teachers began taking classes in this first cohort in summer 2014. In August 2015, all nine teachers graduated. Cohort II began in summer 2016 with another nine teacher who graduated August 2017.

A unique feature of this particular partnership was the strong collaboration between the faculty and district personnel in integrating rigorous and relevant field-based experiences pertinent to specific district needs. Course assignments were intentionally related to district policies, data, and programs. Completion of coursework led to a master's degree in Educational Leadership and students could take two additional classes to obtain the principal certification. All courses were aligned to Texas and national principal standards.

Since the initial district partnership was formed in 2013, the department then created partnerships with eight additional school districts. A second university-school partnership graduated its first cohort of nine teachers in August 2016. A second cohort of eight teachers graduated in December 2018. The third partnership created was comprised of three small districts that came together to form a cohort of aspiring teachers who were eyeing leadership roles in their prospective districts. This cohort began taking classes in spring 2017 and was comprised of 23 teachers. They graduated in May 2018. A second cohort started in fall 2018 with eleven students and graduated in December 2019. Two new cohorts began in January 2018. Both cohorts will graduate the students in May 2020.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this study was based upon Hord's (1986) work on organizational collaboration. Hord (1986) asserted that there is distinct difference between cooperation and collaboration. Collaboration for organizations rests solely upon the development of joint planning, implementation and evaluation (Hord, 1986). The beginning process of the Collaboration Model was based upon the agreement of the organizations on an exchange of tasks; therefore, offering each other a service or product at the end. Additionally, organizations joined forces to plan and executed the design of shared projects, which "resulted in agreed upon outcomes, projects and services" (Hord, 1986, p. 24). This model further "elaborated upon the communication roles established and definite channels created for interaction across the joint project" (Hord, 1986, p. 24). Hord (1986) concluded that it was necessary to "clarify the expectations of the participants, not only of the expectations of the rewards, but of the goals and commitments from each sector and of procedures" (p. 25).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

These are the research questions that guided this study:

- What are the educational leadership preparation program's benefits as perceived by graduate students in the school district/university partnerships?

- What are the educational leadership preparation program's challenges as perceived by graduate students in the school district/university partnerships?

Methodology

The methodology of this study utilized the principles of qualitative research, since the aim of this study was to further understand or to explain the meaning of a social phenomenon "…with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible" (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). In quantitative research, the participants and sites are systematically identified through random sampling. In qualitative research, participants and sites are identified on "purposeful sampling, based on places and people that can best help us understand our central phenomenon" (Creswell, 2012, p. 205). In a qualitative study, reality is constructed by the participants themselves, and it is the aim of qualitative research to create understandings of the experiences of the participants. What is of upmost importance is to document and construct meanings from the participants' views and not of the researchers (Merriam, 2009).

This study's focus was on graduate students who were taking educational leadership classes at Riverside University (pseudonym), and the study was conducted in a naturalistic setting. In a naturalistic setting, participants are not brought into a lab or an unnatural setting. A major characteristic of qualitative research is "up-close information gathered by actually talking directly to people and seeing them behave and act within their context. In the natural setting, the researchers have face-to-face interaction, often over time" (Creswell, 2014, p. 234). In other words, qualitative researchers seek to "simply seek to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved" (Merriam, 1998, p. 11)

In addition, qualitative studies are commonly known to have multiple sources of data rather than relying on a single data source (Creswell, 2014). Examples of multiple sources of qualitative data possible are interviews, observations, documents, and audiovisual information. Crabtree and Miller (1999), put forth that interviews or observations usually "involve the researcher being engaged with the field in some active manner" (p. 14). As part of the qualitative data analysis process, researchers review the multiple data sources to "make sense of it and organize it into categories or themes that cut across all of the data sources" (Creswell, 2014, p. 234).

Thirdly, qualitative studies use inductive and deductive data analysis to build patterns, categories, or themes. Qualitative researchers often work by shifting through the data multiple times to arrive upon clusters of units of information. Creswell (2014) stated that, "this inductive process illustrates working back and forth between the themes and the database until the researchers have established a comprehensive set of themes" (p. 234). Conversely, deductive approaches allow researchers to reflect upon the data from the themes "to determine if more evidence can support each theme or whether they need to gather additional information. Thus, while the process begins inductively, deductive thinking also plays an important role as the analysis moves forward" (p. 234).

Crabtree and Miller (1999), also stated that data analysis "starts with describing, which is a time for reflecting on what is happening to the research team and within the research process and how all of it is influencing and shaping the interpretive process (reflexivity) and what the next steps should be" (p. 20). Following this is a process which "includes organizing, connecting, and corroborating/legitimating" (Crabtree & Miller, 1999, p. 20). Crabtree and Miller put forth that,

Organizing refers to how one enters the data and reorganizes it in a way that helps answer the research question. Connecting is the operation whereby one connects various segments and emerging interpretations within the data to identify and/or discover connections, patterns, themes, and new meanings. This is the heart of the analysis and interpretive process. Corroborating/legitimating concerns the issues of standards, credibility, trustworthiness, and interpretation. (p. 20)

DATA INSTRUMENTS

In this qualitative study, the data collection instrument primary consisted of focus group interviews. By utilizing this data source, the researchers engaged in data collection, "spending a great deal of time at the site where people work, play, or engage in the phenomenon... to gather detailed information to establish the complexity of the central phenomenon" (Creswell, 2014, p. 235). Focus group interviewing was selected since this method was less threatening to many research participants, and this environment was helpful for participants to discuss perceptions, ideas, opinions, and thoughts (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Focus groups are also used to collect shared understanding from several individuals as well as to get views from specific people. (Creswell, 2014). Focus groups typically consist of interviews with a group of people, typically four to six (Creswell, 2014.) Another reason for the selection of focus group interviews for this study was that it allowed for more spontaneous responses and provided a setting where the participants could discuss personal problems and provide possible solutions (Butler, 1996; Duggleby, 2005).

The focus group interviews in this study consisted of 10 semi-structed questions which were designed to elicit open ended responses. Semi-structured question format allowed the participants to "... voice their experiences unconstrained by any perspectives of the researcher or past research findings. An open-ended response to a question allows the participant to create the options for responding" (Creswell, 2012, p. 241). The interview questions in this study guided conversations rather than ridged questions and allowed the participants to openly voice their experiences and express their thoughts about events (Yin, 2009).

RESEARCH SAMPLING AND SETTING

Patton (1990) suggested that qualitative researchers "typically focus in depth on relatively small samples, even single cases selected purposefully" (p. 169). The type of sampling used in this study was purposeful sampling, which according to Creswell (2012), is used when "researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or

understand the central phenomenon" (p. 229). Participants were selected based upon the notion that their selection will reveal information rich data (Patton, 1990). The sampling strategy chosen for this study was to reach out to current and past program graduate students who were part of the partnership school district cohorts. According to Crabtree and Miller (1999), the ideal number of focus group participant ranges from six to eight. Furthermore, if there are fewer than five participants, the interaction and dynamics of the group will be limited, and more than 10 participants will not allow enough airtime for all the participants to express their views (Crabtree & Miller, 1990).

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

The primary data source used were focus group interviews. In this study, the sample population consisted of 67 current and former partnership graduate students from a university educational leadership preparation program who recruited from four school districts/university partnerships. These participants were e-mailed dates, times, and locations for the focus group interviews. Once enough participants responded and expressed interest in being interviewed, the focus group interviews were scheduled and conducted for approximately an hour. The interview sessions were approximately an hour in length and consisted of ten open ended questions that were audio taped.

Data Analysis

Interpretation is a "complex and dynamic craft, with as much creative artistry as technical exactitude, and it requires an abundance of patient plodding, fortitude, and discipline" (Crabtree & Miller, 1999, p. 128). The first step for qualitative data analysis is to organize the data. In the case of this study, the researchers took notes and noted them on the interview transcript and questionnaire, since this helps in the "initial process of exploring the data. These memos are short phrases, ideas, concepts, or hunches that occur to you" (Agar, 1980, p. 103). The next step involved making sense of the data visually. This involves the process of creating themes or finding patterns. This step is typically referred to as coding, which is "the process of segmenting and labeling text to form descriptions and broad themes in the data" (Creswell, 2012, p. 266). Dey (1993) defined this as a process of splitting and splicing the text in categories in which the researcher searches for subcategories in similar sorted segments. The goal of coding is to interpret the data by dividing it into neat segments and to collapse them into distinct themes. This is an inductive process since the process moves from specific instances into a generalized conclusion. In the case of this study, the themes that surfaced were separated into the two broad categories of benefits and challenges.

ESTABLISHING VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

One of the tenants of research is establishing the validity and reliability. By establishing both validity and reliability, this study took on a more credible and accurate tone; therefore, it added to the body of knowledge (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, data collected and analyzed was subjected to triangulation, member checking, and auditing.

Triangulation is a process of confirming evidence from different participants, data types, or data collection techniques (Creswell, 2012). This study used the following sources of data for triangulation: The Memorandum of Understanding between the university and school districts, the focus group interviews, and member checking of the transcription notes. By using multiple sources of data, the researchers ensured accuracy of the study.

Member checking was utilized to establish validity and reliability. Member checking involves the researcher going back to the participants and asking them to verify the transcribed notes and correcting any inaccuracies or misleading information. By doing so, the findings assured a complete and realistic accounting.

Thirdly, an audit was used in this study. The audit, which is often referred to as an external audit, is a process of asking an unbiased colleague to review the methodology and findings of the study. The task of the auditor is to provide any feedback to the research. Typically, auditors investigate the study's findings to see if they are supported by the data or if themes are appropriate (Schwandt & Halpern, 1988).

Results

Of the 67 possible participants, 39 individuals, which included 12 former and 27 current program students, had agreed to participate in a focus group interview. Most of the respondents were female (82%). Former and current students reflected similar years of experience in education, 11.15 and 10.45 years, with an overall 10.95 average. The researchers analyzed the data by identifying codes of interest supported by direct quotes from the interviews. The codes were collapsed into two major themes, the benefits and the challenges. Several sub-themes emerged from the two themes.

BENEFITS

The sub-themes under benefits were opportunities for students, integrating field-based experiences, support from professors, and networking opportunities. The sub-themes under challenges were need school district liaison, need collaboration between partners, consider cohort students for employment, school facilities and equipment.

Opportunities for students. A strong collaborative partnership between the school district and the university was built on trust. Students felt that having school district personnel invited to present in classes gave them an insight on that department and provided information on the goals of that department. Students enjoyed getting to know who the central office personnel were. The classes were tailored to provide students as much information about every component of the school district and the students appreciated that.

They're really taking the time to go out of their way and be there for us, especially since our classes are in the evenings from five to ten. We've had guest speakers that have

shown up at seven, you know, and I actually think it's really nice because one of our professors is a principal in our school district, and so I just like that it's…(Student A)

Students felt that by having school district personnel present in classes they got first-hand information about the school district and any new positions that were coming up. The students preferred knowing which contacts in the school district could assist them if they needed information about programs and services for students.

You know, and they'll come to our class and they're having this conversation as if they're best friends. You know, and [laughter] so they, you know, it's just so inviting and I feel like it's refreshing because, you know, she is a principal in our school district and she's been doing absolutely amazing (Student B).

In one school district, the students were happy that a principal co-taught a class with the professor.

Seeing an administrator in that teaching role, I think just gives us more encouragement, and to know that she really believes in the partnership between UTRGV and our school district is really great. I mean she gives up her time to come to the class and organize, you know, the things, just, she understands what we're doing, and she believes in the program. She believes in us being there, and so I think having a person from the school district is a really good way to solidify the partnership (Student C).

Some students stated they wanted to hear more from the school district professionals, especially when it came to studying student data for the school districts. They learned so much from the school district data specialists. The students indicated they felt they could email school district personnel to inquiry about information needed for class projects. Students who had previously contacted school district personnel for student information felt they were welcomed to information that would benefit their classrooms. One student indicated she loved seeing school district personnel taking doctoral classes and felt there was a connection between them as they were working toward a common goal.

I remember one time, I met up with her in the same building when we were having class. You know, and I was like, what are you guys going over? Is it very similar? You know, and they were on like a completely different aspect of education, but it was just interesting to see and you know, I feel like even the professor has that connection too, because he'll share a lot of, like, upper level things with us too. So, I think that's really nice (Student D)

Several of the students indicated that when they read that a partnership was being established between the school district and the university, they wanted to apply. They saw it as an opportunity. for them to grow professionally and wanted to take advantage of the opportunity. One student felt that participating in the Leadership Partnership Program gave him the opportunity to develop a camaraderie between all the students.

You get to know each other on a one-to-one basis. Uh, there's a good amount of collaboration, so you get to work together; I'm getting to work with other teachers, getting to know their campuses. I've been isolated in mine, so it's just good to know the thoughts and feelings and atmosphere of their campuses through their experiences (Student B).

Integrating field-based experiences. The program integrated rigorous and relevant field-based experiences pertinent to specific school district needs. Course assignments were intentionally related to school district policies, data, and programs. All courses were aligned to Texas and national principal standards.

We are understanding the content, but we're understanding how the content applies to the inner workings of our school district since the activities are tailored to our school district, so there's a lot that I've learned about my school district that I didn't know before. The collaboration as well has been a big benefit (Student E).

The students indicated they learned so much from the in-class discussions. Several stated they looked forward to class. They knew the professors' expectations from the very beginning of the classes. Students indicated that they feel more prepared with the discussions just because of the overall experience of the professors. "When we are discussing something in her class, she will tell us, 'This is how I handled it. This is how you need to handle that situation'" (Student A). Another student stated, "when we have our discussion in class, I kind of feel like everyone's on the right page" (Student F).

Students tended to do much of the discussions in small groups and then reported to the larger groups. "We are placed in groups to do much group work. In our groups, that's when we learn the most because when we get into those discussions in class; a lot of us have so many ideas" (Student G). Some of the assignments were scenario-based. Students were given scenario that consist of problems or dilemmas. Students first tried to solve the dilemma independently. Then the students worked in groups and compared their responses.

I feel like all the scenarios that we've considered or discussed in class have been amazing because like I said, all of us have a different idea. So, whenever we're having these discussions, there's a student that will raise their hand and be like, "Okay, well what if this would have happened? And what if this would have happened? And how do we answer something like this?" You know and that's kind of, I feel like, what's going to prepare us more because, you know how they say like you aren't ever really prepared for something until you're put into that position (Student C).

A student indicated that because their cohort has a very good working relationship and the professor, they are comfortable asking a lot of question and engaging in the discussions. Student D said, "...and we've been able to really dissect a lot of possible scenarios. We're not just learning from a textbook; we're not just learning from a PowerPoint; we are totally engaged in the learning process."

Support from professors. Students stated that a great advantage of the partnership was the support they received for all professors. One indicated, "they knew we were teachers and that we were very busy; they knew some of us tutoring after school. The professors told us to let them know if we were had to be held up at a campus. They were willing to work with us" (Student F).

"The professors that we've had in class actually have been very accommodating. They'd say that they understood that sometimes we were in a bind. Just let us know how we can help" (Student H). The students noticed that when one of them encountered a challenge, somehow a solution was inevitable. They felt the professors were open-minded and challenges and dilemmas were solved. The challenges that we have encountered had solutions. The students were grateful that the communication between them and the professors had been great.

I can email a professor and get a timely response. I can ask questions and I don't feel like they're not going to respond. So, I believe the communication, I feel, is very strong. And I think I can speak, well, I would say I could speak for the cohort, because as a cohort, we've had this discussion before (Student I).

Students in a cohort liked that their classes were held at the university center. They knew that starting a master's degree was going to be a little bit difficult. They also knew that the travel time between their campuses to the university was about forty-five minutes. However, when they realized that the classes were going to be offered at the university center in their community, they were excited that the classes were going to be in their community. Most students were delighted in that the travel time to the university center in their community was about ten minutes away.

In another partnership, classes were taught in central office which was ideal for all students in that cohort. In another partnership, classes were held at a university teaching site. This was about 15 to 20 minutes away from their campuses. They did not have to drive to the main university campus which was about 45 minutes away. A few students stated that they felt bad because they knew that these professors were traveling to the school districts and sometimes that meant that professors traveled 60 miles one way. The proximity to the classes from the students' campuses very close and was ideal for the students. They knew they needed to take advantage of the partnership. They were grateful that the university was able to come to them instead of the students driving to the university.

Networking opportunities. An advantage to the partnership was the ability to network with other teachers in the school district. The relationships that were established were phenomenal. Students appreciated that they now knew other teachers from other campuses across the school district. They felt comfortable calling on a teacher who was in the cohort or who was recommended by someone in the cohort.

A benefit was that because it's a cohort of our school district, we've been able to really network with other teachers in our school district. Some people you kind of knew from a

distance, but now we've really created these relationships, and I call on them when I need help with my lessons or need certain strategies or approaches for my classes (Student F).

Connections were made between elementary and secondary teachers and between different content teachers in the cohorts. They commented that they have had so many opportunities to work with other people within our school district, just from being in the cohort. It has opened doors to meeting many individuals across the school district and other campuses. The students feel that they can start conversations with any cohort member. "We have something to talk about. I feel like we're at a different level. And like, not only are you building those relationships amongst the cohort, but also across the different school districts" (Student I).

CHALLENGES

In addition to the benefits that students revealed during their focus group interviews, they also identified challenges and concerns they encountered during their master's program. Four sub-themes emerged. They were school district liaison, collaboration between partners, consideration for employment and school facilities and equipment.

District liaison. When a memorandum of understanding was signed, the school district either assigned a staff member to be the liaison between the school district and university or the university used the school district point person as the liaison. Students were not usually informed or updated on administrative communications about the university and school districts exchanges. After interviewing the students, they indicated there were some challenges they encountered while in the program.

Student J voiced that "professors might not understand the way our school district is structured and tailoring, so they might not understand the way the school district operates. You know, but they've done a great job of bringing in the speakers so that we understand". Student C stated that "a school district-level person can also make sure that the cohort's needs are being addressed, that there's a proper channel." Another student was somewhat disappointed that they did not get to learn about the other school districts, "but at the same time, um, overall in general in all the classes we were not exposed too much to other school districts or how they work, experiences shared from there, so somewhat of a challenge" (Student K).

I knew when I applied for this cohort that it was tailored to my school district, you know, and I love, I mean I want to grow up and work within my school district, but at the same time I feel like it'd be nice to get exposed to what other school districts around us are doing. Maybe a school district person could arrange that (Student G).

Sometimes our professors will say, "Oh, well, you know, I have this other cohort, you know, and they're working about an hour away from us and they do it like this. Maybe that's something you guys would like to implement when you guys working in an administrative role." And it's kind of like, oh okay. You know, and it ends there, you

know. And it's like, well I would like to learn a little bit more about it because maybe we can kind of tailor it and tweak it to our liking, so I think that'd be… But I mean again, that's being really picky [laughter] (Student L). The student was stating that the professor was presenting strategies that one of the other cohorts was doing and wanted to share them with their cohort.

Collaboration between partners. When faculty were assigned to teach in a specific school district, they met with school district personnel and directors to obtain information about the school district. They met and planned for the classes they were to teach so that the school districts' mission, visions, and values were not misrepresented. Faculty did not inform the students that they meet with school district for planning purposes. For this reason, several students indicated that there needed to be collaboration between the university and the school districts.

"The collaboration between professors and school district professionals should be tailored more so that it's more specific to my school district …" (Student G). Another student said, "so if the professors can collaborate more with the school district that they're working with and their professionals, I think that it would be more beneficial" (Student B).

Just wish that my school district would have been a bit more hands-on. Um, they were the ones who collaborated with you all, yet I feel like they were not present in any of our classes or involved in knowing. Um, I don't even think they know what classes we're taking right now or that we're so close to finishing, so I just feel like they were very hands-off and um, I feel like they should have been a little bit more hands-on, especially since I feel like they're home-growing us for specific positions and within the school district. You would have thought they would have taken a little bit more interest in where we are in our classes right now (Student M).

We would like for the school districts to allow us time to go and visit other school districts. Because we could learn strategies on how particular campuses operate, we would like that some of the school districts would allow for us the time for us to go and observe uh, between the school districts and to explore certain issues. I know that was something we talked about that (Student N).

I think maybe more communication was needed. On both ends, between the university and the school district and the school district and, uh, perhaps to us as participants in the program. It still seems sometimes I think we all feel lost. You know, some of our colleagues don't exactly know when they're graduating; I think maybe just more communication, so our school district supervisors know where we're at and they know that we are looking to advance. That's why we're in this program (Student H).

Um, I felt a little unclear as to the timeline of different things as a cohort with UTRGV. At the beginning, I was told in class, not specifically but to the class, what might be our end result, like the type of exam or expectations. And so we were under the impression that it was going to be like a portfolio, or just different things. And so, as class went on, it

was kind of vague. "Yes, you might be doing this, you might not. Things are changing," and so, then at the end we were given instructions (Student O).

I think there was a time where it was very unclear, and it was confusing and we weren't sure what was going to be the path, so we were planning for one thing, saving projects, you know preparing, and then like, "No, you're not going to do that, you're going to do this," and so we adapt, we change. That's the way the world works, but I think from the very beginning, kind of having that information clearly would have been good (Student K).

Consideration for employment. Students who applied to this master's program were interested in being school leaders. They knew that the assistant principal positions were the one position that they would be ready for when they finished the program. They hoped the school district would consider them for assistant principal positions when these positions became available.

I don't think anybody from the school district has checked on us to see like, "Hey we're investing in these teachers to represent out school district," and yet I could be failing a class and they don't know, and maybe it's trust. Maybe it's that they trust us to do what's right and to go to school and to pass (Student G).

A student was somewhat displeased that the school district was not considering candidates from their cohort for administrative positions. "We have our master's degree and then they [school district] goes outside for assistant principal and then we're not getting hired. They're picking people from the outside, so I don't see how that's fair" (Student M).

"If the school district is going to be making a concerted effort for a cohort group, then the cohort group should be the first group that they consider for positions that are available within the school district" (Student P).

I kind of feel like maybe at the school district level, I understand that they have a lot going on, but I kind of think we all have a lot going on too. Pretty much, if they chose us for this master's cohort program, um ... I believe whoever's in charge of making that decision should in turn be checking up on us and making sure that we're still invested into the program. I know that a few of our colleagues have dropped out of the program [because of time] and uh maybe it could be a little bit feeling a little left out. But I do hope we are considered for employment at this school district (Student I).

School facilities. Classes were taught either on university campuses or on school campuses. Different school districts provided the facilities and the technology needed to support and facilitate instruction. In one school district, the campus selected for the classes was an older campus. The classrooms had wall heaters and window air conditioning units. The students were somewhat uncomfortable with the classroom environment as they were used to being housed in updated campuses with central air conditioning and the latest technology like smart boards and wireless internet. Students

voiced their concerns about having classes in the older campus. The following semester, the school administration moved the cohort to a newer campus that had updated technology. Prior to being moved to the newer campus, a few students had some concerns. This student was referring to the older campus, prior to being to the newer campus.

If the school district is going to be saying that they're going to be doing this, then the facilities need to be up to university quality. They must be able to offer the same things because if not, it feels like students are being punished and that they're the ones who have to deal with these substandard conditions, when they should be having the full access because they're paying for it (Student M).

"The AC was not working. Even in the newer facility, the AC's not working, and we were waiting for an hour and a half until someone from the school district to be notified so they could turn on the AC" (Student J).

As soon as we say something, they'll turn the air on. I know last semester we had like a big fan in the room and there was ventilation, like an aluminum tube that came down from the room. Um, from the ceiling. It was there for a few weeks (Student M).

A student from a different school district, also voiced concern about the older campus. My experience with taking classes in a school district was not very pleasing. Whenever we had class on the campus in that school district, we had to deal with situations where the room was not properly ventilated. Then there were small pests inside the restroom areas and when you would go to the restroom, I felt we were getting bit (Student F).

Access to technology was very important to the students as many could access the university library via the internet. One of the students indicated that one of the campus was not equipped with the technology needed to be online.

We had to find different ways to, just to access our assignments. Sometimes there was no projector for the professor. The professor had to try to bring his own projector as well, and that was just a big concern. Towards the end, they did move us over to new facility" (Student C).

We can't see the professor or the projector screen for the PowerPoint presentations sometimes being displayed on the TV. It just feels like sometimes we have the technology, but it's not necessarily aligned to be able to make it easier for us to be able to participate" (Student I).

It became obvious to the faculty that the first the campus was not equipped with the technology needed and did not have technology for classroom instruction. Students were moved to a different classroom on the same campus that semester. Eventually the students were moved to a newer campus which provided the students the resources needed in a space that was more comfortable.

Students in the four other cohorts did not have the concerns with the facilities or the technology on the campuses. A cohort in one school district held class in a classroom housed in a newly completed central office building. This classroom had wireless access and interactive screens. Another cohort attended classes in one of the university's smaller campuses complete with a lab, interactive technology with computers, internet connections, and smart boards in each classroom. Another school district held classes in the high school library. This facility provided a computer with a project, internet access, and interactive screens.

Discussion / Conclusions

The data analysis revealed two overarching themes of benefits and challenges of the school district/university partnership cohorts. Upon further analysis, the researchers concluded that the school district/university partnership benefited the students by 1) providing positive opportunities for students to become familiar with their school administrators' knowledge, 2) integrating field-based assignments and experiences, 3) delivering a strong level of support by the professors, and 4) providing opportunities to nurture networking opportunities with other school district cohort students.

The first benefit was that the school district/university partnership provided an ample amount of opportunities for students to become familiar with their school districts organizational structure and the central office leaders. It was noted by the graduate students that, numerous class meetings regularly included school district/campus administrators as guest speakers; the graduate students who are currently teachers, appreciated the insights that their school district administrators shared with the classes. The participants often voiced that because of the school district/university partnerships, it was easier to interact with school district/campus administrators in their work settings. "Participants of educational partnerships become trained in current best practices and then are able to share their knowledge and experiences with their colleagues" (Kopy, 2006, p. 29). Additionally, other opportunities provided to the graduate students in the cohorts allowed them to research teaching practices and strategies of operation from their perspective school districts (Auton, Browne, & Furtrell, 1998). Whitaker and Barnett (1999) concluded that university partnerships often strengthen programs and provide greater relevance to the work in schools and to increase the number of qualified candidates for the principalship. As Hord's (1986) Collaboration Model states, it is vital that organizations "join forces to plan and execute the design of shared projects, which result in agreed upon outcomes, projects and services" (p. 24). Ultimately, for the graduate students who were current teachers, their beliefs, practices, and sense of efficacy were influenced by participation in a collaborative program between a university and a school district (Welch & Sheridan, 1993).

Secondly, the school district/university partnerships in this study benefited students by integrating field-based experiences with their assignments and class discussions. Students learned from discussions and lectures and applied them by using field-bases assignments and experiences. Burnaford and Hobson (1995) revealed that a tight connection between fieldwork and coursework was necessary to provide such learning

experiences, experiences that help student about depth and meaning from their knowledge. Additionally, in order to affect a wider range of changes beyond individual classrooms, graduate students needed to consistently share what they learned with their peers. The school district/university partnerships created opportunities for connecting the academic work with the field the based experiences. The graduate students also stated that the adjunct professors, who were either central office or campus-based administrators, provided expertise and shared their knowledge of the inner workings of school districts. The knowledge provided a different dimension to the students. As cited in the literature, it was important for professors to aid in bridging the gap between theory and practice (Holmes Group, 1995). Students also expressed gratitude for the academic support provided by the university professors. The university professors, who were former school administrators, were also able to help the graduate students connect theory and practice. This was also reported in similar studies. Basom and Yerkes (2004) reported that "that program professors brought strong theory elements, and the adjunct professors designed lessons and field experience activities that related to the theory" (p. 54). Browne-Ferrigno and Sanzo (2011) also found that "university professors provided the leadership knowledge base and assisted with disposition refinement toward effective school leadership, but application of learning and socialization of candidates required coordinated support from school districts and practicing principals" (p. 650). What was needed was a united effort from both the school districts and university preparation programs.

Thirdly, from the findings, it can be concluded from the participants' perspectives that professors in the school district/university partnerships provided support and encouragement to the graduate students. According the Memorandum of Understanding between the school districts and the university, one of the requirements was to support students and assist them in engaging in field-based experiences. The students in the study expressed a great appreciation of having a supportive relationship with their professors. For example, if students were running late or unable to attend classes, they were able to email or text message their professors. In a study by Basom and Yerkes (2004), students echoed this by reporting that they "felt supported throughout the program and appreciated the emphasis on building a learning community. Faculty hoped these activities would find their way into the practice of these educators as they built learning communities in their own schools" (p. 54).

Another finding that can be concluded was that the graduate students in the school district/university partnerships benefited from the networking opportunities created by the partnerships. First, students were able to meet and get to know their own school district/campus leaders along with other educators from their district. Also, they got to hear campus leaders from other school districts which gave them different perspectives of other school districts. Students explained that they felt much more at ease in collaborating with other school district personnel and reaching out to them if needed. The cohort model, coupled with the school district partnerships, allowed students to acquire a stronger self-confidence and collegiality with their classmates, since many class assignments were typically field-based activities. According to Sadao and

Robinson (2002), one of the benefits of educational partnerships was the ability to form and nurture professional interactions which brought about changes to the organization.

In addition, the researchers concluded that the following challenges confronted these graduate students in the school district/university cohorts: 1) the strong need for school district liaisons, 2) a need for collaboration between the school districts and the university, 3) consideration for employment by the home school district, and 4) need for updated facilities and top of the line equipment.

One of the first major conclusions from the perceived challenges of the students was the desire for school district liaisons, or someone who would serve as the point person between the school district and university. Students overwhelmingly expressed the need to be better informed over topics such as tuition and textbook reimbursements, registration details, or site of classes for the following semesters. There was a point person from each school district that the department chair worked with to plan the cohorts for each school district, but the students were not aware of these individuals. The students wanted a point person to discuss topics about tuition and registration and not topics of recruitment and admission into the cohorts. The students perceived this to indicate a lack of communication. University professors were "anchored at one end by emphasis on research and scholarship... and at the other end, the school districts focused on localized, practical concerns and activities" (Knight, Wiseman, & Smith, 1992, p. 269). Thus, possible collaborations of roles and responsibilities over practical matters between school districts and universities could be hindered (Ledoux & McHenry, 2008).

Another conclusion from the perceive challenges is the need for a stronger curricular collaboration between the school districts and the university. The students in this study reflected that assignments were not tightly aligned with school district goals and currently initiatives. Students also lamented the need for a stronger residency type program that allowed for more of an engaged approach to learning. True partnerships should be formed with tighter structures which "implies an active, direct form of cooperation...only after people connect with ideas, form relationships based upon equity and trust, and develop commitments to shared goals" (Osguthorpe, Harris, Black, Cutler, & Harris, 1995, p. 7). Preparing successful principals "requires collaboration between key personnel working in higher education institutions and Pk-12 school districts who commit to assuring that new principals have requisite knowledge, skills, and proficiencies for leading contemporary schools" (Browne-Ferrigno & Barber, 2010, p. 1). It is through a shared committed which spans the boundaries of school districts and universities that provide a stronger program, because "neither school districts nor universities can single-handedly provide the breadth of experience needed to adequately develop and nurture leaders for today's P-12 schools" (Laboratory for Student Success, 2005, p. 2). Therefore, leadership educators and leadership practitioners must collaborate. "In these more tightly coupled arrangements, professors and practitioners must work together to develop curriculum, deliver instruction, assess learning progress, and monitor internships" (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004, p. 471).

A third conclusion that can be derived from the perceived challenges is that when forming collaborative school district/university principal preparation partnerships, the districts should work collaboratively with the human resource departments to create a pool of potential leader candidates. Graduate students in this study expressed frustration that they had been overlooked by their own school districts for employments opportunities and that other individuals had been given employment preferences. Some of them felt disillusioned because they had been excluded from acquiring positions that they felt they had been adequately prepared for. The grow your own programs "emerged from preparation program critiques as school districts and schools of education looked to develop new paradigms for principal certification" (Versland, 2013, p. 3). Southern Regional Education Board (2006) concluded that successful principal preparation programs have systems in place for school district partnerships to recruit highly skilled teachers for school leadership positions, and to engage expert practitioners in mentoring aspiring school leaders. Typically known as grow your own leadership preparation programs, "principal candidates apply for or are chosen to participate in leadership academies that specifically prepare those candidates to work as school leaders in the context of the sponsoring school districts" (Versland, 2013, p. 4).

The last conclusion that can be derived from the perceived challenges is that having updated classroom facilities with the latest technology to make learning much more conducive for the graduate students. A few students in one particular school district felt ill at ease due to an older campus that had wall heaters and window air conditioning units. There was also poor ventilation, so a large industrial fan was used in the classroom. The classroom did not have the resources such as computers, a data media project or a stable Wi-Fi connection. It is important to note that the school district administration was made aware and the students were later moved to a newer campus. It is also important to mention that in five years of these partnerships, this was an isolated case. The other five school districts provided classrooms with the most updated technology and had newer facilities.

Ndirangu, and Udoto (2011) found that poor facilities, deteriorating in-door air quality, poorly maintained lecture and library buildings susceptible to weather hazards, and inadequate teaching and learning resources, were likely to impact negatively on student achievement. Furthermore, their findings indicated that "for effective intellectual, cultural, and technical development of students enrolled in courses and programs to take place, adequate provision of library and information resources were necessary" (p. 212). In other words, whether Pk-12 or university students, all students needed to have properly maintained and the most updated technological resources available for them. Ferreira (1995) asserted that students in a resource rich environment were seemed to be friendly, more relaxed, resourceful, and positive towards school.

Recommendations

The findings of this study demonstrated that in order to better prepare future leaders for an ever-changing leadership landscape, the following recommendations were presented.

- Collaborate with local school districts leaders and campus practitioners about current administrative practices for the program's curricula. Such partnerships should tailor curricula to reflect local school district/campus issues.

- Create field-based experiences and course assessments.

- Create and maintain a direct communication system through school district/university-based liaisons.

- Develop school district leadership academies that draw from a pool of graduates for entry level administrative positions.

- Provide and maintain updated technologically equipped classrooms for cohorts to meet.

The researchers noted that these recommendations were imperative for a successful school/university partnership. It is of utmost importance that our partners' voices be heard, respected, and addressed. As with Hord's (1986) Collaboration Model, "both organizations are able to share in the product or service that would not been possible as separate agents" (p. 25). In other words, there must be a true collective commitment by both, the school districts and the university, working toward the same vision and goals in the preparation of prospective school leaders.

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