

Runninghead: PRACTITIONER PROFESSOR

The Practitioner Professor: Applying Theory to Practice

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Abstract

This study investigated how adjunct professors who were fulfilling educational leadership roles at the building and district levels perceived how their role as educational leaders impacted their course instruction. The qualitative study was conducted during the fall semester of 2006 and the spring semester of 2007. Twenty-one adjunct professors were enlisted to participate in the study. They were interviewed and later asked to complete a questionnaire. The instrument used open ended questions that probed their perceptions of how their work experience impacted their classroom instruction. The responses were analyzed and the themes emerged. It was found that these Practitioner Professors perceived that their current profession impacted their teaching in the following three ways: (a) leadership relevance, (b) leadership validity, and (c) leadership authority.

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The use of adjunct professors in colleges and universities across the nation has increased rapidly in the past thirty years. Euban (2006) found that the adjunct faculty comprised 46% of the total college and university faculty. The average adjunct professor does not have a permanent position with the university. He or she usually carries a minimum teaching load that does not require research or administrative responsibilities, and their employment is dependent on the student enrollment (Kamps, 1996; Wegner, MacGregor & Watson, 2003). At times, these people are called sessional employees (University of Queensland, 2003) or Contingent Professors (Euban, 2006). Many times, these adjunct professors who teach in educational leadership programs are currently fulfilling administrative positions in schools and school districts. These principals, superintendents and central office administrators have been labeled practitioner-professors (Johnson, MacGregor & Watson, 2001).

These professors, who are perfecting their craft in their respective jobs, bring a rich experience to the classroom. They apply theory learned in the classroom to real life leadership experiences (Beem, 2002). Otto (2002), an acting superintendent spoke, of his adjunct experience as "...an excellent way for me to connect theory and practice" (p. 1).

Schneider (2003) found that two important factors that motivate superintendents to accept positions as adjunct professors were to improve the training of new leaders and to pass on their professional knowledge to their students. Robertson (2002) found that superintendents can effectively model their knowledge of effective curriculum and instruction. These practitioners can tie theory learned in the classroom to their numerous on the job experiences.

The students who prepare to be school leaders need both the theoretical and research foundation courses, along with the preparation for daily challenges of school administration. The coursework they receive from the connected use of full-time faculty members can be supplemented with current practitioners in the field. The use of part-time faculty members who are practitioners can provide valuable perspectives to aspiring principals who are completing principal preparation programs, especially if the course content is matched to the practitioner's specialty. They provide the perspective of applying real world experiences in the classroom (Wegner, MacGregor, & Watson, 2003).

The educational leadership professionals who are practitioners in the field provide professional skills, experience and contacts from their employment in schools and school districts that are valued by their students (Laurence, 1998). In addition, the students who attended administrator preparation classes appreciated a practitioner who brought real-life scenarios from the trenches (Watson & MacGregor, 2002). Styron, Maulding, & Hull (2006) found that one respondent from their study wrote:

I want professors who have experience with the situations that I will encounter as a principal. I feel that this experience will be more helpful than if the professor did not have any practical experience. Anyone can learn how to ride a bike, but I want to learn from someone who has actually ridden a bike and knows how it feels and what to do when you start to fall off. (p. 4)

Collaboration and interaction with the part-time professors and the full-time professors is necessary. Students need a way to learn skills in a school setting and observe effective practitioners applying solutions to real problems. Practitioners should

not only provide presentations in the classroom but be involved in field activities and offer these individuals rich administrative experiences (Livingston, David, Green & Despan, 2001).

A successful collaboration of theory and practice was used when a practitioner and a full-time professor combined their classes in order to team up in an education policy course. The full-time professor acted as the researcher and the adjunct professor filled the role of a school district superintendent. The full-time professor cited the literature while the practitioner articulated the realities of school leadership. In addition, the professor, who had been a school principal, discussed policy from the principal's perspective and the adjunct professor talked about the policy from the superintendent's viewpoint. This approach gave the students a sense of how different theory and reality could be and that they must be reconciled. The students truly enjoyed the course and felt that they had experienced a great mix of theory and practice. It was a wonderful experience for both the professors and the students (Vandal, 2002).

Purpose of the Study

Students in administrative preparation programs enjoy practitioners, but what are the perceptions and perspectives of these practitioner professors? The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of adjunct professors who were fulfilling educational leadership roles at the building and districts levels and to determine how their roles as educational leaders impacted their instruction and course content.

Methodology

This qualitative study was conducted during the fall semester of 2006 and the spring semester of 2007 at a university in the southwestern part of the United States.

Twenty-two adjunct practitioner professors were enlisted to participate in the study. All of the adjunct professors held terminal degrees in educational leadership. The study was explained to the adjunct professors and they were asked to take part in the study. The professors who chose to participate were then given an instrument that utilized open-ended questions. The practitioner professors were asked to individually reflect in writing on how their role as a practitioner professor impacted their curriculum and instruction in their educational leadership classroom. Participants were not allowed to discuss their responses with either the researcher or other participants and all responses were confidential.

This data was analyzed following the recommendations of Bogdan and Biklen (1998), where the responses were then organized through the process of comparing, contrasting, and ordering the information. Ideas about the data were developed that used a structured and formalized method of experimenting with ideas and relating the ideas to research. Next, a color code system was used to identify emergent themes that developed from the research.

It was found that three themes emerged. These themes identified how their roles as a practitioner impacted their curriculum and instruction in their educational leadership classrooms. The following three themes were: (a) leadership relevance, (b) leadership validity, and (c) leadership authority.

Findings

The first theme that emerged was leadership relevance. These practitioners felt that they brought real experiences to the classroom. They made the classroom real for their students and were able to personalize the course information for their students. In

addition, they were able to relate these incidents to the course information. These professors were able to connect research, theory and practice and share daily administrative experiences and practices. They also incorporated real problem-based learning. One practitioner stated, “Real life experiences make the book examples come alive and the students can relate.” Another said, “Real examples are always interesting and enlightening to students. I approach theory as the best explanation of proven practices.” “...[I] weave many stories into instruction. All of this helps to personalize the course”, spoke a third practitioner professor.

The second theme was leadership validity. These practitioners felt that the information they presented was not only relevant but also valid. This was due to the fact that many of their teaching assignments matched their current positions. They were able to bring current state and federal standards and guidelines into the classroom due to the fact that they worked in the subject area daily. A practitioner said “I’m able to provide the current information-especially in my subject matter of special programs.” Another said, “The advantage is that the examples are current.” They were also knowledgeable about the history of the current laws and policies and were able to provide a rationale for their implementation. “It is very rewarding to explain to students why a policy is in place...to explain to them the behind the door decisions that we made and why... and to see their reaction,” said a practitioner.

Because of their experience in public schools and school districts, these practitioner professors felt their work experience resulted in the third theme, which was leadership authority. These professors felt that their administrative knowledge, skills, and know-how provided them the authority to teach in educational leadership classrooms.

While these professors did not have extensive university teaching experience, they were confident that they held the position of school administration expert in their classrooms. They truly believed that their experience gave them the authority to teach. One practitioner professor said, “My position as Area Superintendent exposes me to first hand knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment.” Another supposed, “I have had the good fortune to have experienced a wide range of school related topics and as such I can impart my experiences to others.” A third professor declared, “I have worked in various positions in seven school districts. This allows me to explain how things are done in large, small, urban, suburban, and rural areas.”

These professors also felt that their authority was conveyed to them from their students. They believed that their students appreciated them bringing their real-world experiences to their classes and these real-world experiences made them worthy to teach in the educational leadership classroom. “The wealth of current examples is always a strength of practitioner professors,” stated a participant. Another said, “I think there is also some instant credibility from the students’ perspective.” Yet another said, “I really believe that students appreciate a professor who is still connected to the day-to-day operations of the school system. Students feel like these professors truly understand what it means to be an educator in the public school system.”

Conclusions and Implications

These administrators felt that their experience in their practice gave them relevance in the classroom. Their use of real-world examples in the classroom was relevant to the students. Their experience also gave them validity in the classroom. Matching the course taught to the professors present employment expertise, allowed them

to bring the most current information into the classroom. In addition, their work experience gave them the confidence to be the authority in the educational leadership classroom.

While these professors who were still practicing administrators were not involved in university service or research, they did believe that their experience made them successful in the educational leadership classroom. They were able to connect practice to theory using real-life examples. They also believed that their students enjoyed these examples. These practitioners had the confidence to bridge the gap between university theory and the practice of school leadership. They used the knowledge and skills they had learned during their employment as school administrators in order to become practitioner professors. They were able to connect theory to the practice of educational leadership. As one practitioner professor said, “With my experience, I believe I am able to connect research, theory, and practice very well. I believe I help them [the students] appreciate theory and research - two terms not always appreciated by practitioners.”

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