Action Research: A Tool for Promoting Faculty Development and Continuous Improvement in Leadership Preparation

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.

Cynthia L. Carver
C. Suzanne Klein
Oakland University

This paper introduces the use of action research to examine the content and outcomes of university-based leadership preparation programs. Using examples drawn from an ongoing action research project with candidates in a master's level principal preparation program, we demonstrate how the collection and analysis of candidate's written reflections, completed as part of required coursework, informs our work as university faculty and supports a cycle of continuous program improvement. Over the years, action research has become a common strategy for professional learning in teacher education. The use of action research to study leadership development remains uncommon, however, especially among leadership educators. This study offers a new and promising approach to examining the preparation of school leaders.

Introduction

There is little doubt today that school leadership matters. Researchers confirm that among school-related variables, principals follow right behind teachers in shaping students' learning outcomes (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004; Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2003). Unlike teachers who work directly with children, however, the influence of administrative leaders on student achievement is largely indirect, e.g. hiring and supervising staff; creating a culture of high expectations; observing and giving feedback on instruction; establishing data systems that inform instructional decision-making; working with staff to interpret and act on learning results. Through these indirect

actions school leaders establish the conditions that support growth in student learning (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom & Anderson, 2010). Thus, a core responsibility of any principal preparation program should be to equip future school leaders with the complex understandings, skills and commitments needed to organize and lead schools where all children have regular and sustained opportunities to learn and to achieve.

We know that exemplary preparation programs share a set of common components that include research-based content, curricular coherence, and problem-based learning strategies that integrate theory and practice (Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe & Orr, 2009; Young, Crow, Ogawa & Murphy, 2009). Further, course content in these programs stems from a well-defined and integrated theory of leadership or conceptual foundation, with instructional strategies that are designed to "maximize learning, learning transfer, and leadership identity formation" (Murphy, Moorman & McCarthy, 2008; Orr, 2006). Still, while we may know quite a bit about the features of a high quality principal preparation program, much less is known about how these features are implemented at the program level (Frick & Riley, 2010; Murphy & Vriesenga, 2004). For example, we know little about the efficacy of different delivery models and the program features that are most effective and/or influential in shaping prospective leaders' practice. While leadership program descriptions are plentiful in the literature, few empirical studies have examined the content and/or outcomes of this learning (Preis, Grogan, Sherman & Beaty, 2007). This knowledge gap leaves us with "remarkably weak evidence" upon which to build strong programs (Smylie & Bennett, 2005).

As coordinators of a leadership preparation program, we wonder how to interpret these recommendations without stronger outcome-driven curricular or instructional guidance. What instructional strategies prompt the kinds of reflective thinking that we know prospective leaders will need? What readings and activities develop the professional knowledge and skill that will help them solve their own problems? What programmatic structures reinforce the dispositions that support effective leadership practice? These questions have empirical value, but they also have practical urgency. As leadership educators, we seek research-based instructional models and strategies that work.

In this paper, we describe our rationale for using action research to examine the content and outcomes of our own university-based principal preparation program. To highlight the promise of action research for informing continuous program improvement, we present early findings from an analysis of candidates' written reflections. These findings demonstrate how the systematic analysis of coursework, completed in the context of a leadership preparation program, can inform our work as instructors and as program developers.

Using Action Research to Guide the Preparation of School Leaders

Concern over the quality of school leadership preparation in the U.S. has generated a range of policy studies and research reports that, taken collectively, highlight the core features of a high-quality principal development program. A recent Wallace Foundation (2013) report distills this decade-long body of research into five "lessons" learned: effective principals are skilled at "shaping a vision of academic success for all students; creating a climate hospitable to education; cultivating leadership in others; improving

instruction; and managing people, data and processes" (p. 6). As instructors in a university-based principal preparation program, our lever for influencing school change comes through the quality of our curricular and instructional programming. Action research is our tool for understanding and assessing our effectiveness at preparing school leaders who are committed to improving learning outcomes for all children.

Preparing Effective School Leaders

It has been argued that the worksite demands on principals represent an unrealistic set of expectations (Copland, 2001). Still, the public continues to expect – and rightly so – a great deal from its school leaders, regardless of experience or preparation. As leadership educators, our task is to ensure that candidates have every opportunity to become knowledgeable about the principal's role, bold in their thinking, and skilled in a wide range of leadership practices. One way of ensuring quality is to design programs based on existing leadership standards, using recommendations that stem from the research literature.

Common features of a high quality leadership preparation program include a strong conceptual foundation, plus a rigorous and coherent curriculum focused on leadership for learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; UCEA, l998). As Murphy & Orr (2009) explain, this conceptual foundation functions as a "theory of leadership" for school improvement. Quality leadership preparation also features instruction that actively engages students and addresses authentic problems of practice (SREB, 2006). Coursework is designed to facilitate reflective thinking (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009) and to engage students in intellectually challenging materials and ideas (Murphy & Orr, 2009). In these programs, assessment is based on demonstrated performances (Murphy & Orr, 2009). As such, candidates regularly engage in self and peer-assessment (Darling-Hammond et al, 2009). Candidates in strong leadership preparation programs also participate in carefully structured and focused field internships that are purposefully integrated with coursework (Murphy & Orr, 2009), feature rigorous performance assessments (SREB, 2006), and offer mentoring and coaching by expert practitioners (Darling-Hammond et al, 2009).

In addition to programmatic features, a corresponding curriculum must also reflect the knowledge, skills and dispositions embedded within established professional standards (ISLLC, 2008). Such leaders have a clear vision focused on student learning outcomes (City, Elmore, Fiarman & Teitel, 2010; Leithwood et al, 2004; Marzano et al, 2003). They are knowledgeable across multiple domains, e.g. curriculum and instruction; teacher supervision; school business and finance; school law. They work collaboratively with others and are committed to building strong and cohesive professional cultures in their buildings (Louis et al, 2010; Portin, Schneider, DeArmond & Gundlach, 2003). They demonstrate integrity, and they earn the trust of those with whom they work. Importantly, they are willing to advocate for and lead change (Fullan, 2011).

Action Research and Continuous Program Improvement

As challenging as it might be to design a leadership preparation program with the recommended content, structures and processes, the bigger challenge is to ensure that

graduates can demonstrate the requisite understanding and skill in real schools where it matters the most. The task of aligning performance data with the planned curriculum is at the heart of university-based program evaluation and accreditation requirements – a process that many faculty find cumbersome and outside of their typical responsibilities. Action research, however, can be a useful and manageable tool for supporting continuous program improvement as well as faculty development.

Action research, also known as practitioner inquiry and teacher self-study, is the process by which practitioners (e.g. teachers, principals, university faculty) systematically examine authentic problems of practice using the inquiry process of problem posing, data gathering, and data analysis for the purpose of improved practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, l993; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2008). In action research, the researcher studies his or her practice for the purpose of improving that practice. In short,

> *"[T]he researcher's professional context is the site for inquiry, and problems and issues within professional practice are the focus of investigation. Because the practitioner is a researcher and the professional context is the site for inquiry, the boundaries between research and practice often blur, creating unique opportunities for reflection on and improvement of the practice…" (Borko, Liston & Whitcomb, 2007, p. 6).*

As explained above, action research stems from the belief that teaching and leading are, at their core, highly reflective practices (see Dewey, l933; Schon, l983; l987). Through sustained reflective thinking, one can examine and assess their practice so as to make needed adjustments.

Over the years, action research has become a common strategy for professional learning in pre-service and in-service teacher education. It is also a research strategy used by teacher educators, and increasingly by school leaders (Dana, 2009; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009), to better understand their pedagogical practice. Blurring the lines between researcher and practitioner, quantitative and qualitative methods, action research offers immediate and local applicability to practice. Although scholars have advocated the benefits of modeling research in the field of leadership education on practices common in teacher education (Reihl, Larson, Short & Reitzug, 2000; Stein & Spillane, 2005), an action research approach to studying leadership development and practice remains uncommon, especially among university instructors (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Thus, this study offers a new and promising methodological approach to studying the preparation of school leaders.

Research Design

To inform our instructional practice and to guide curricular improvements, we designed an action research study for the purpose of following two cohorts of candidates through our master's level principal preparation program. Unlike traditional empirical research conducted by outsiders for purposes that are external to the programs or practices under investigation, action research enabled us to bring an inquiry orientation to our course instruction. Through action research, we could practice bi-focal vision as both instructors and researchers. Equally important, research results would be of immediate value, as

findings could be implemented immediately for the purpose of improving practice at the course and program levels.

The analysis reported here is unique in that it focuses specifically on prospective school leaders in the early stages of their preparation program. Still employed as teachers, these individuals are exploring the possibilities and pitfalls of transitioning from the classroom to the principal's office. By carefully studying candidates' written work, we (as instructors) can both monitor and assess candidates' development as leaders through the program. Equally important, we are able to make programmatic as well as pedagogical adjustments in light of what we are learning. Drawing on the analysis of written work completed naturally as part of a course requirement, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. *How does a candidate's development as a school leader unfold across a preparation program, what is that nature of that development, and can we find predictable turning points in their learning?*
2. *How do select program features (e.g. reflective writing, mentored internship; culminating portfolio) support candidates' development as school leaders?*
3. *What program experiences and activities do candidates report as being most and least effective at helping them develop as school leaders?*

Program, Participants and Instructors

The program studied is a university-based principal preparation program in the Midwest. As a state-approved principal certification program, the curriculum is aligned with state and national leadership standards, candidates are required to complete a substantial internship experience, and program faculty incorporate performance-based assessments into their courses. Because this is a cohort-based program, candidates take their courses as a group throughout the entire seven-semester program. A typical cohort enrolls 10-15 candidates. Located in a suburban community, the university draws students from a wide variety of school contexts: public, private, parochial and charter, as well as urban, suburban and rural.

Two cohorts of students were invited to participate in the study and twelve signed statements of consent. Despite coming from a variety of school settings and backgrounds, candidates are similar in that most are early career teachers. Among the group of twelve, eight are male. One is already a practicing administrator, while the others have filled a variety of teacher leadership roles, e.g. school improvement chair, professional development designer, new teacher mentor, department or grade level chair, union representative, coach. All have expressed interest in becoming a school administrator. Note: Roughly half of candidates declined to participate in this first round of analysis, possibly fearful that their name and/or writing would be publicly associated with study results. Others expressed concern based on a lack of experience participating in research as a student. Both explanations highlight limitations of an action research approach to program evaluation.

As instructors, we come to the university through different pathways. One of us is a former superintendent, the other studies school leadership as a researcher and has

worked with school administrators through outreach projects. In addition to teaching in the program, the authors also serve jointly as leadership program coordinators.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collected for this larger study includes program and course-related artifacts for two cohorts of students (see Table 1). Additional data will include a short phone interview scheduled three months following graduation. To ensure consistency and coherence across the program, each cohort is assigned a faculty member who assumes responsibility for teaching the first and final courses in the sequence, as well as overseeing candidates' extended internship experience. All course-related artifacts collected are naturally occurring activities and assignments in the program.

Table 1
Course-embedded Data Collection

COURSE-EMBEDDED DATA COLLECTION
PROGRAM BEGINNING
EL 500 Readings Reflections (x8)
EL 500 Leadership Vision Statement
PROGRAM MIDTERM
EL 560 Self-Reflection
PROGRAM END
EL 630/640 Internship Plan of Work
EL 630/640 Internship Self-Reflection (with Mentor Letter)
EL 690 Capstone E-Portfolio * with revised Leadership Vision Statement

The analysis reported here is based on written reflections prepared during candidates' first semester in the program. Specifically, candidates were asked to complete eight reflections across a thirteen-week term. In both sections of the course, these written reflections were designed to be short (2-3 pages in length), addressing two or three critical ideas from the assigned reading. Roughly 240 pages of written text, all generated during this first course, were analyzed.

Analysis of candidates' written work consisted of coding passages according to emergent themes based on our research questions (Strauss & Corbin, l998). Analysis of the full data set will compare and contrast themes across courses and writing assignments, and whether the student is early, mid or late in the program (Miles & Huberman, l994). Across these data analysis strategies, our goal is to look for knowledge and skill development relative to the ISLLC Standards, and for dispositional leadership traits, e.g., confidence, assertiveness, vision. To increase validity and consistency, the two authors (who also served as cohort instructors), coded and analyzed the data as a team.

To support our claim that action research is a useful tool for continuous program improvement and faculty development, we share findings from the analysis of written reflections completed during the first course of the sequence. We begin by describing this course and our approach to data analysis in this specific context.

Instructional Moves and Turning Points

The first course that candidates take in the program is an introduction to educational leadership. This course is designed to orient candidates to a wide variety of school leadership topics, including the role of the principal, building trustworthy relationships, leadership for teaching and learning, and leadership for meaningful school change. The ISLLC Standards serve as the framework for course content. Performance-based tasks and assignments include the development of teacher interview questions, formulating a theory of action for instructional improvement, crafting a leadership vision statement, and developing a 90-day school leader entry plan.

As a course assignment, candidates are asked to complete eight reading reflections across the thirteen-week term. This assignment provides candidates with an opportunity to make sense of each week's assigned readings by connecting key themes (e.g., change leadership) to their past and future leadership experience (e.g., their typical reaction to change). This assignment also provides candidates with the opportunity to develop their skill as analytical thinkers and writers.

Our primary interest with these initial written reflections was to examine the development of candidates' thinking across the term. Could we identify critical incidents or turning points in a candidates' thinking? Were these turning points associated with particular topics or tasks? And, could we identify any patterns within or across the two groups? We begin with general observations about candidates' engagement in the task of writing these reflections. We then share two "turning points" where we observed noticeable shifts in candidates' thinking.

Instructional Moves that Support Student Engagement

Reflections demonstrated a strong interest in readings that broadened candidates' understanding of the principals' role and concomitant responsibilities. This included readings about principals' work with teachers and with parents, as well as principals' role in leading change and promoting high quality instruction. In these reflections, candidates shared their hopes and dreams for influencing change on a larger scale. They also shared their fears and concerns. Many spoke to the loneliness and isolation of the principals' role, while others commented on the burden of making high-impact decisions. As one shared, *"For the first time, I actually feel as though I am getting a sense of the enormous pressure that administrators in education deal with on a daily basis."*

We also saw strong interest in readings that helped candidates to apply their new understandings in concrete ways, e.g. approaches to interviewing and hiring teachers; creating "entry plans" for the first three months on the job; planning staff meeting agendas. Candidates typically approached these reflections in one of two ways: by looking back and assessing a previous experience, or by looking forward and imagining how they might handle a future situation. One particularly useful metaphor for candidates

was the idea of "using the balcony" to view a problem from a wider lens before taking action. As one student remarked, *"Because of this class, I have begun to take a balcony view on everything that happens."*

Additionally, we routinely saw candidates try their hand at making sense of current issues and asserting their point of view. In one group, a comparative analysis of countries with high-performing educational systems prompted a series of written responses that tended to be longer and more impassioned than usual. In the other group, we saw a similar response to readings about standardized testing and the achievement gap. Our experience, based on these two cohorts, suggests that candidates are highly motivated and engaged by topics that prompt ongoing debate, perhaps because those topics invite diverse viewpoints.

In short, our analysis of the reading themes found that candidates' reflections could be grouped into three categories of response: reports of expanded understanding; critical issue analysis; and applied problem-solving. In hindsight, these three categories or frames described the primary ways that we, as instructors, were engaging candidates in the course content through readings, assignments and in-class activities. It wasn't until we completed this analysis, however, that we were able to give names to these instructional strategies or moves.

Turning Points in Student Understanding

Further examination of the written reflections revealed what we called "turning points" in candidates' understanding. While coding the data, we looked specifically for language that indicated changed thinking or perspective, e.g., "This week's reading was really powerful for me because". We then grouped like comments together to see what patterns emerged. Among the turning points recorded, two data groupings stood out because of the frequency by which they were reported: new insights on the principal's role, and learning to think differently.

New Insights on Principal's Role & Work

Nearly all candidates, often more than once, commented on how the readings introduced them to new ways of thinking about leadership and, more specifically, the role of principal. Since most candidates entered the program with a limited understanding of the role, this new and expanded awareness was important, as it allowed candidates to begin identifying as a leader. Comments like the following were common.

> *When reading this chapter, many things became a reality that I had not thought about before. It is interesting to be working as a teacher and reading about administrators who we see from time to time. I know they are very busy, but things that I have read are making it clear as to what is going on behind the scenes.*

One topic that received early attention in these reflections was the notion of isolation and aloneness, which candidates also connected to the burden of decision-making. Through

reading, writing and discussion, candidates grew more comfortable with the notion of working autonomously and making difficult decisions, as reflected in the next excerpt.

> *This is something that seems to come with the territory as you have to come up with decisions that are not going to make everyone happy. I just think that it is something that people need to accept because someone has to make the decisions.*

And, as candidates grew in their understanding of the principal's role and work, the better positioned they were to imagine themselves as leaders in the future. The following excerpt highlights this shift in perspective.

> *I think my original fantasy of being a principal was that I would swoop into a building with a list of great ideas that the teachers, students and families would be thrilled to embrace. I am now realizing that I was being incredibly naïve and I'm a little embarrassed by my previous thoughts. As a new principal I will…*

Unfortunately, not all candidates made this shift so easily or clearly. Candidates in the group with limited teaching experience were more likely to draw on the readings to inform their teaching practice than to see implications for their future leadership practice. Conversely, one student in the group with extensive school experience was observed de-valuing the readings and discussion as offering nothing new. In both cases, had we been more aware of candidates' "stuck" points, we might have been more deliberate in our instructional moves. For example, we could be more intentional in our feedback by suggesting that candidates to compare and contrast issues from different perspectives, and examine implications for leadership.

Additionally, a sub-set of candidates, especially at the beginning of the term, used the readings to explore their secret fears. Will my old teaching colleagues still talk to me? Will I be able to make difficult and sometimes unpopular decisions? Later in the term, without prompting, these same candidates reflected on their growing confidence as leaders, which corresponded to a self-reported reduction in their overall fear and anxiety. Note the growing confidence evident in the following excerpts for one student in the group.

> *First Reflection: As I start this master's program I am stressed out beyond belief. I'm not sure that I can do it. I'm not sure if I am wasting my time. Even as I write this, I am tearing up. There is an enormous amount of responsibility on the principal to improve the school each year. To make your school the best… Can I be an effective leader?*

> *Final Reflection: I didn't realize until this week's readings that [winning a staff over by acting as a member of the team] will backfire. As tough as it may be to set myself apart as a leader, that is exactly what I need to do.*

Our candidates seemed to value this opportunity to safely express their fear and concern. From our perspective, doing so – even without instructor feedback – enabled candidates to re-focus their learning in meaningful and purposeful ways.

Learning to Think Differently

We saw ample evidence that candidates viewed educational topics anew as a result of the course. Areas of interest that sparked widespread discussion among the groups include international comparison to the American system of education; parent and community engagement; factors contributing to the achievement gap; and instructional reform strategies. For many candidates, the course reading and discussions stirred their curiosity and passion, prompting thoughtful and probing reflections. This shift in candidates' thinking was most noticeable in three areas: adoption of an organizational perspective, working with teachers, and the nature of effective leadership.

Organizational Perspective. One of the shifts that we hoped to see candidates make was from a classroom-only perspective to one that encompassed the entire building or organization. As previously mentioned, several candidates adopted the practice of "using the balcony" to intentionally re-frame organizational issues and problems. This routine was especially helpful when candidates were trying to understand the reaction of their peers, or the behavior of a principal. The following excerpt offers an example of what this shift looked like in one student's reflection.

> *After reading this section, I was compelled to examine my current school and principal. I witnessed the change of leadership in my school and was absolutely stunned by the transformation… Our school identity and culture is changing, or rather has changed, dramatically over the last two years. After reading this section I begin to grasp the entirety of the task … she has taken on the challenge of reinventing the school's culture, image and understanding of itself…. This must be the biggest and most challenging task to undertake as a principal – the changing of an ingrained school culture to fit the demanding high stakes future.*

For others, this shift occurred more subtly over time as we noted fewer reflections focused on the classroom and more reflections focused on the school. For example, one candidate noted: *"This week I found myself… thinking about things like what would happen if certain teachers changed positions or left? How would that team or grade level be impacted?"* Notably, we found two similar references in this candidate's writing over time, providing evidence that this shift in perspective was relatively strong.

Working with Teachers. A second area where we were likely to see a shift in thinking or perspective occur was in reference to working with teachers – a topic that generated a great deal of discussion. Such comments often reflected an interest in figuring out "how" to work effectively work with teachers. For example, several candidates commented on the importance of ideas coming from teachers, frequently citing a personal example to illustrate their point. Another wrote about the importance of empowering teachers to reach their potential. Candidates also reflected on the myriad ways their colleagues have reacted to change, which prompted further discussion of building climate and its importance to leading change. These examples seemed to help candidates think anew about the nature of teachers' role and work.

Other candidates reflected on the anticipated aloneness they would feel as principals, isolated from their former peers. A member of the group who already holds an administrative position wrote: *"As I read about the emotional aspect of being the boss, it*

occurred to me that when I was a teacher, I enjoyed the fact that I only made decisions about what went on in my classroom... As a principal, I have no one." Not surprisingly, this observation was repeated across multiple reflections, as evidenced by the following comment: *"Here comes the dark side of being a principal and it hits you like a ton of bricks... It is a lonely position."*

Yet another way we saw candidates' refer to working with colleagues came through the supervisory process and their growing realization that holding teachers accountable would demand a different way of thinking and acting. The following quote reflects the uncertainly one student had about the evaluation process.

> *It struck me when reading [assigned text]: How do you make sure your teachers are not just playing the game? Realizing this, I felt naïve…. This certainly has been a negative reflection [in tone], but I see it as an important puzzle to solve.*

For a core group of candidates, building trust was the key to working with teachers as former colleagues. Imagining herself in a leadership role, one candidate explains: *"I believe that trust is the key component to being a great leader. By showing your staff respectful, responsible and well thought out decisions, they will build their trust in you. I feel that if your staff trusts you as a leader, you can take your staff to any level."*

Shared Leadership. A third way in which we saw demonstrable shift was in how candidates idealized leadership. Specifically, it was interesting for us to note how often candidates referenced a shared or distributed perspective on leadership, as highlighted in the following comment.

> *Being an effective principal means that we do not have to do everything by ourselves. We need to bring in the faculty and community and allow the entire group to be engaged in the education of the candidates we work with each and every day.*

Because references to shared leadership were so common this first semester of the program, we are now beginning to examine the data for shifts in how candidates see themselves as leaders over time and how that may impact their reported behavior.

Pedagogical and Programmatic Implications

As instructors, action research has provided us with fresh eyes for monitoring and assessing candidates' learning and development in our classes. For example, the in-depth analysis of candidates' writing helped us to identify three distinct forms of course engagement: expanding understanding, analyzing issues, and practical problem solving. We can now analyze a syllabus or lesson plan for these three forms of engagement. We can also look explicitly for the three forms in candidates' written work, as well as in their contributions to class discussion. In sum, action research has provided us with new lenses and frameworks for examining how well candidates are learning in our courses, for monitoring the results of new curricular content, and for talking collaboratively with one another about new instructional approaches. This heightened attention on candidates' learning has also increased our confidence as leadership educators, as we now have tools

for examining, monitoring and assessing the curricular and instructional choices that we make.

Additionally, action research has influenced our work at the programmatic level. Specifically, findings from this initial analysis are prompting three practical changes to our program. First, findings highlight the importance of teaching candidates the value of reflective thinking, as well as the techniques that will support the development of a reflective leadership practice (Hart, 1983). Studying our candidates' writing further brought to our attention the importance of intentionality when encouraging reflection (Murphy & Orr, 2009). Administrative leaders need to react quickly when the data demands change. They need to engage others in problem solving, and they need to weigh alternatives on the way to a decision. To manage this complexity, leaders will need to cultivate their own skills of reflection. To ensure that our candidates have the opportunity to develop as reflective practitioners, we are now piloting the use of a rubric that we can use to help candidates develop the reflective skills that they will need as school leaders.

Second, we are more intentional about prompting turning points in our candidates. To prepare practice-ready leaders, we need to make the most of each reading and assignment. There is urgency about our work and the work that our graduates will be called upon to do. Now that we better understand what creates and supports these turning points, we can be more deliberate in our efforts to engineer such experiences, e.g. incorporating issue-based readings that can be discussed and debated from multiple viewpoints.

Third, we are beginning to see a set of candidate profiles emerge from our work that are based on three characteristics: a) the ability to engage in reflective thinking; b) an openness to learning; and c) the ability to shift one's perspective from the classroom to the organization. Admittedly, most of our candidates enter the program highly reflective, open to learning, and able to think organizationally. Early in the program, these candidates demonstrate an ability to think critically and analytically, which they further develop and refine through structured class activities. A smaller group of candidates start the program with under-developed skills of reflection and a lack of experience through which to frame issues and problems. Over time, however, these individuals catch up to their peers. More troubling is a third and very small group of students that fall outside the norm. In our data set, one individual resisted learning, another was unable to shift attention from the classroom to the organization, while a third lacked the skills of critical analysis and reflection. Although more data is needed to confirm the strength of these profiles, they are suggestive of how action research data can support instructional improvement. In this case, candidate profiles can be used to help select developmentally appropriate learning opportunities, as well as guide career coaching for candidates. With refinement, these profiles might also help to screen unsuitable candidates from entering the program.

As demonstrated through this analysis, action research is a promising tool for promoting faculty development and continuous program improvement. It is not, however, without limitations. As a research methodology, it is important that leadership faculty work closely with their Institutional Review Boards to secure human subjects approval for the collection and analysis of student course work. It is also important to share with candidates' your intentions for data collection and your assurance that their privacy and confidentiality will be maintained. Worth noting, our experience at securing research

approval and consent for this and similar action research projects has been very positive (Freedman & Carver, 2007; Young & Carver, in press).

Programmatically, building organizational capacity for engaging in continuous program improvement must also take priority. Reflecting on ten years of program improvement efforts, Cosner, Tozer & Smylie (2012) outline a set of recommended strategies for institutions that are committed to ongoing program evaluation. First and foremost, prior to study design, program faculty will need to agree on a focus for inquiry that unifies potentially competing interests and concerns. Data collection systems, norms and routines will need to be developed and communicated. The organization will need to develop capacity for continuous improvement by supporting a culture of inquiry among faculty, as well as establishing rewards and incentives for faculty engagement in collaborative work. Finally, program faculty will need to be attentive to the dilemma of balancing between program stability and continual change. We find these recommendations helpful and appropriate for faculty and programs that are engaging in action research for continuous program improvement, as they mirror our own experience. Organizational capacity is the key to sustaining action research over time.

Conclusion

There is virtually no empirical evidence that redesigned university programs, even those deemed innovative and exemplary, are making progress toward preparing school leaders to improve student learning. Also missing from existing literature are descriptions of the work that is required to dramatically improve school leader preparation programs as well as exemplars of robust student and program outcome data – data that are increasingly expected for program evaluation and that are essential for informed program improvement (Cosner et al., 2012).

Despite the efforts of well-intended reformers, traditional university-based programs continue to come under fire for failing to prepare principals for the challenges faced by today's school leaders. Those who are critical of traditional leadership preparation cite a number of persistent problems, including weak selection criteria that fails to screen for leadership potential; a curriculum that is fragmented and disconnected from the reality of practice; the priority of facilities management over instructional leadership; limited opportunity for candidates to practice and apply new learning; plus internships that lack rigor and focus (e.g., Cheney & Davis, 2011; Hess & Kelly, 2007; Levine, 2005). In short, these critiques claim that traditional programs are out-of-date and out-of-touch.

Our programmatic commitment to continuous improvement through systematic data collection and analysis directly counters such concerns. The immediate application of data-based findings supports transformed practice, innovation and continued inquiry. This inquiry orientation further fosters creativity and experimentation in teaching and models for prospective leaders the importance of reflection on practice. Through the action research process, our program and our instruction is continually being monitored and improved, lending support to our claim that action research is a promising strategy for program renewal and instructional improvement. Given the persistent critique of our

work as university-based leadership educators, this is a perfect time to expand our repertoire and give action research a try.

References

Borko, H., Liston, D. & Whitcomb, J. A. (2007). Genres of empirical research in teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education, 58*(1), 3-11.

Cheney, G. R. & Davis, J. (2011). *Gateways to the principalship: State power to improve the quality of school leaders.* Washington: Center for American Progress.

City, E. A., Elmore, R. F., Fiarman, S. E., & Teitel, L. (2009). *Instructional rounds in education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Cochran-Smith, M. & Lytle, S. L. (2009). *Inquiry as stance: Practitioner research in the next generation.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Cochran-Smith, M. & Lytle, S. L. (l993). *Inside/outside: Teacher research and knowledge.*New York: Teachers College Press.

Copland, M. A. (2001). The myth of the superprincipal. *Phi Delta Kappan, 82(7), 528-533.*

Cosner, S., Tozer, S. & Smylie, M. (2012). The Ed.D. program at the University of Illinois at Chicago: Using continuous improvement to promote school leadership preparation.   *Planning and Changing, 43*(1/2), 127-148.

Dana, N. F. (2009). *Leading with passion and knowledge: The principal as action researcher*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Dana, N. F. & Yendol-Hoppey, D. (2008). *The reflective educator's guide to classroom research: Learning to teach and teaching to learn through practitioner inquiry.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Darling-Hammond, L., Meyerson, D., LaPointe, M., & Orr, M.T. (2009). *Preparing school leaders for a changing world: Lessons from effective school leadership programs.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Dewey, J. (1933). *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process.* Boston: DC Heath & Company.

Freedman, L. & Carver, C. L. (2007). Preservice teacher understandings of adolescent literacy development: Naïve wonder to dawning realization to intellectual rigor. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 50*(8), 654-665.

Frick, W. C. & Riley, A. T. (2010). A self-study on preparing future school leaders. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education, (5)*9, 310-334.

Fullan, M. (2011). *Change leader: Learning to do what matters most*. San Francisco: Jossey- Bass.

Hart, A. W. (l983). Reflection: An instructional strategy in educational administration. *Educational Administration Quarterly, (29)*3, 339-363.

Hess, F., & Kelly, A. (2007). Learning to lead: What gets taught in principal-preparation programs. *The Teachers College Record, 109*(1), 244-274.

Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (2008). *School leadership policy standards.* Arlington, VA: National Policy Board for Educational Administration.

Leithwood, K., Louis, K. S., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How leadership influences student learning.* New York: The Wallace Foundation.

Levine, A. (2005). *Educating school leaders*. Washington: The Education Schools
        Project.

Louis, K. S., Leithwood, K., Wahlstrom, K., & Anderson, S. (2010). *Investigating the*
        links to improved student learning: Final report of research findings. New York:
        The Wallace Foundation.

Marzano, R. J., Waters, T. & McNulty, B. (2003*). Balanced leadership: What 30 years of*
        research tells us about the effect of leadership on student achievement. Denver:
Mid-   Continent Research for Education and Learning.

Miles, M. B. & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded*
        sourcebook (2nd Ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Murphy, J., Moorman, H. N., & McCarthy, M. (2008). A framework for rebuilding initial
        certification and preparation programs in educational leadership: Lessons from
        whole-state reform initiatives. *The Teachers College Record*, *110*(10), 2172-2203.

Murphy, J. & Orr, M. T. (2009, Spring). Industry standards for preparation programs in
        educational leadership. *LTEL-SIG Newsletter, 17*(1), 9-11.

Murphy, J. & Vriesenga, M. (2004). *Research on preparation programs in educational*
        administration: An analysis. Colombia, MO: UCEA Monograph Series.

Orr, M. T. (2006). Program evaluation in leadership preparation and related fields. In
M.D.   Young, G. Crow, R. Ogawa & J. Murphy (Eds.), *The handbook of research on*
        leadership preparation (pp. 457-498). New York, NY: Routledge.

Portin, B. S., Schneider, P., DeArmond, M., & Gundlach, L. (2003). *Making sense of*
        leading schools: A study of the school principalship. Seattle, WA: University of
        Washington.

Preis, S., Grogan, M., Sherman, W. & Beaty, D. (2007). *What the research and literature*
        say about the delivery of educational leadership preparation programs in the
        United States. Unpublished manuscript prepared for the University Council for
        Educational Administration (UCEA) and the Teaching in Educational
        Administration Special Interest Group (TEA-SIG) of the American Educational
        Research Association (AREA).

Riehl, C., Larson, C. L, Short, P. M. & Reitzug, U. C. (2000). Reconceptualizing research
        and scholarship in educational administration: Learning to know, knowing to do,
        doing to learn. *Educational Research Quarterly, 36*(3), 391-427.

Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. New
        York: Basic Books.

Schön, D. A. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Smylie, M. A. & Bennett, A. (2005). What do we know about developing school leaders?
        A look at existing research and next steps for new study. In W. A. Firestone & C.
        Riehl (Eds*.), A new agenda for research in educational leadership (pp. 138-*
        155). New York: Teachers College Press.

Stein, M. K. & Spillane, J. (2005). What can researchers on educational leadership learn
        from research on teaching? Building a bridge. In W. A. Firestone & C. Riehl
        (Eds*.), A new agenda for research in educational leadership (pp. 28-45)*. New
        York: Teachers College Press.

Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and*
        procedures for developing grounded theory (2nd Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Southern Regional Education Board (2006). *Schools can't wait: Accelerating the redesign of university preparation programs.* Atlanta, GA: Author.

University Council for Educational Administration. (l998). *UCEA program guidelines.* Available at www.ucea.org.

Wallace Foundation. (2013). *The school principal as leader: Guiding schools to better teaching and learning.* New York: Author.

Young, A. K. & Carver, C. L. (in press). Shifting attention: Using learning self-assessment tools during initial coursework to focus teacher candidates on student learning. *Teacher Education Quarterly*.

Young, M. D., Crow, G., Ogawa, R. & Murphy, J. (2009). *The handbook of research on leadership preparation.* New York: Routledge.