Examining the Value Aspiring Principals Place on Various Instructional Strategies in Principal Preparation

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Abstract This article reports on a study of the value master's students in a principal preparation program placed on a variety of instructional strategies. The aspiring principals completed a survey with fixed-response and open-ended items. The students' most valued class discussions were about how their personal experiences related to the class topic and how to apply the topic to practice. The class activities they valued the most highly were problem solving, simulations, small-group discussions, and whole-group discussions. The highest rated out-of-class assignments included writing reflective papers, conducting interviews and observations, and performing leadership activities in schools. The types of readings the master's students most appreciated were case studies and journal articles. In describing their "outstanding professor," the aspiring principals focused on the professor's personal qualities, creation of a positive learning environment, and constructivist teaching.

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Introduction

Research has established the effects of the school principal on teacher and student performance (Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Marzano, Waters, & McNutty, 2005; Orphanos & Orr, 2013; Orr, 2006), as well the relationship between exemplary principal preparation programs and their graduates' capacity to be successful school leaders (Ballenger, Alford, McCune, & McCune, 2009; Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007; Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Davis, Darling Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005; Orphanos & Orr 2013; Orr, 2006). However, exemplary programs have been referred to as "pockets of innovation" (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012, p. 27), and many scholars have cast doubts on the capacity of traditional university-based principal preparation programs in the U.S. to prepare successful school leaders (Elmore, 2006; Hess & Kelly, 2007; Levine, 2005; Martin & Papa, 2008; McCarthy & Forsyth, 2009; Murphy, 2006; Teitel, 2006).

Scholars have called for a wide range of reforms for principal preparation, including partnerships with school districts, programs built around agreed-upon values and a clear vision, more rigorous recruitment and selection procedures, cohort groups, faculty and school mentors, more relevant and coherent curriculum, improved pedagogy, integration of coursework and field experiences, longer and higher-quality internships, more rigorous student assessment, and continuous program assessment and improvement (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007; Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Davis, Darling Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005; Green, 2013). However, in publications that describe various components of high-quality programs, pedagogy tends to be treated briefly. The study reported here sought to go beyond the general calls for more effective pedagogy by determining aspiring principals' perceptions of a variety of instructional strategies used by faculty in a principal preparation program.

Instructional strategies for principal preparation

Although traditional instructional strategies such as the lecture are still used extensively in principal preparation programs in the U.S., "many programs are emphasizing the use of powerful pedagogical practices, rooted in adult learning, to create more dynamic learning experiences in both coursework and field experiences" (Orr, 2006, p. 495). Shelleyann Scott and Donald Scott (2015) call for instructors in educational leadership programs "to integrate opportunities for students (the novice principals) to apply the theory in the real world, ideally to solve problems, guide action, or to make decisions" (p. 50). Below, a number of specific instructional strategies recommended by reformers are described.

Strategies that bring practice to the graduate class

Margaret Orr (2006) notes that case study and problem-based learning (PBL) have become "the primary mode of teaching in many programs because they offer situated learning and the means to try out multiple perspectives" (p. 495). One approach to case study involves a short lesson on a particular topic followed by the introduction to the students of a real or realistic case related to the topic. After reading the case,

students analyze it, brainstorm ways of addressing the situation presented in the case, and present their analysis and recommendations (Diamantes & Ovington, 2003). Students can also write their own cases based on school situations they have experienced or observed and their visions of how they, as school leaders, would address the issues present in the case (Sherman, 2008).

Problem-based learning can be either student-centered or problem-stimulated. In both models of PBL, the professor provides small groups of students with a description of a problem, expected product, and deadline for completion. In the problem-stimulated model, the professor also provides learning objectives, resources, guiding questions, and assessment exercises (Bridges, 1992). Simulations are a third way that leadership preparation can bring practice to the graduate class. Benjamin Dotger (2011) describes simulations in which graduate students play the roles of school leaders, students, teachers, and parents in situations based on the real-world experiences of practicing school leaders. In these simulations, students in the role of school leaders, and without scripts, address problems while interacting with students in other, scripted roles. Students in the role of school leader review videos of the simulation and reflect on their performance individually and with other students. In recent years, computer systems have enabled simulations in virtual environments (Dieker, 2014; Dieker, Straub, Hughes, Hynes, & Hardin, 2014).

Strategies that promote reflection

One strategy for promoting student reflection is the use of self-assessment tools, which can range from lifestyle, learning-style, or leadership-style inventories to complex processes, such as 360-degree feedback (Dyer, 2001; Seyforth, 2008). Ben Jenson, Amélie Hunter, Tim Lambert, and Anna Clark (2015) write, "these tools can provide multiple sources of feedback on individuals' performance, working and communication styles. This enables participants to objectively assess their skills, helping them to reflect and build self-awareness" (p. 40). Assigning reflective journals is another strategy recommended by Jenson, Hunter, Lambert, and Clark (2015) who argue, "consistent with adult learning principles, journals and logs encourage participants to reflect on their experiences and assimilate new knowledge with their existing mental frameworks of leadership. This helps cement learning and behavioral change" (p. 42).

Autobiography is an additional strategy for supporting reflection. Sara Layen (2015) concludes, "the telling of life stories helps to develop greater self-knowledge and clarity, and through understanding life experience leaders become more authentic and more effective" (p. 277). Collaborative autobiography involves a small group of students alternating between the individual writing of life histories and group sessions in which they share and discuss their writing (Brown, 2015; Diehl, 2012). Although typically used primarily for student assessment, student portfolios also provide students with opportunities for ongoing reflection on course content, field experiences, growth and development over time, and their future as an educational leader.

Field-based activities

Field-based activities can take place during internships or be embedded in regular coursework across the program. A growing trend in the U.S. is to assign aspiring

principals a school-based mentor at the beginning of their preparation program to assist them in field-based activities throughout their program (Gordon, Oliver, & Solis 2016). One increasingly popular field-based activity is the collaborative learning walk. Students in the Danforth Educational Leadership Program at the University of Washington, for example, visit cohort members' schools to do collaborative learning walks and then analyze the teaching they have observed (Gordon, Oliver, & Solis, 2016). Action research is a powerful, long-term field activity in which the aspiring school leader both facilitates and collaborates with a group of teachers as the group identifies a focus area, gathers data to learn more about the focus area, designs an action plan, implements the plan, gathers evaluation data, and revises the action plan as necessary (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2018).

Field-based experiences need not be exclusively school based. For example, students can be involved in both community-based learning and community development. Miguel Guajardo and Samuel Garcia (2016) describe a university-provided, district-based principal preparation program that embeds community learning and development within leadership preparation. Strategies used with the aspiring principals include *pláticas*, or conversations, with community elders, the recording of the oral histories of the community, the analysis of historical documents available from community libraries and community members, the mapping of community assets, and community participation in professional and curriculum development.

Emerging innovations

One emerging innovation in educational-leadership preparation links educational-leader development to the visual and performing arts, including such activities as visiting arts centers, reading creative literature, completing visual arts projects, and participating in and observing improvisational role plays. Perceived outcomes for leadership students engaged with the arts have included increased reflection, the adoption of new perspectives, more willingness to take risks, and enhanced creativity (Katz-Buonincintro & Phillips, 2011). Technology has provided a host of innovations for principal preparation; it can be used to deliver instruction completely online, assist in blended instruction, or enhance face-to-face instruction (LaFrance & Beck, 2014). New forms of technology for use in principal preparation are constantly emerging. Virtual environments were mentioned earlier in the discussion of simulations. Lisa Dieker, Carrie Straub, Charles Hughes, Michael Hynes, and Stacey Hardin (2014) have described four levels of virtual environments:

1. Virtual reality desktop avatars;

2. Mixed-reality environments;

3. Immersive 3-D environments; and

4. Brain-computer interfaces (the ability to look, touch, hug, see, hear, smell, and potentially taste (p. 57).

The first two of these levels are already in use; the last two are in development.

Tailored strategies for particular content

Many instructional strategies have been tailored for particular content in principal

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preparation programs. An example of this is the teaching of social justice leadership, for which scholars have proposed a number of tailored strategies (Brown, 2004; Furman, 2012; Martinez, 2015; Shields, 2014), including the following:

- Race literacy quizzes;
- Privilege walks ("one step forward, one step back" exercise);
- Readings and videos on social justice leadership followed by discussion and written reflection;
- Diversity panels;
- Visits to cultural settings other than one's own;
- Visits to schools focused on social justice;
- Cross-cultural interviews;
- Equity audits; and
- Reflective journaling on issues or experiences related to social justice.

Another example of a content area calling for tailored instructional strategies is democratic leadership. Barbara Mallory and Charles Reavis (2007) argue that democratic school cultures are essential for school improvement, and they outline a process for preparing aspiring principals to be democratic leaders. First, students are presented with a model democratic school that they examine and discuss. Next, students review cases and discuss how schools in the cases could move toward democracy. Students then participate in simulations in which they play the role of school leaders attempting to move a school toward democratic practices. Students in the role of principal are provided real-time feedback from colleagues. The simulation is followed by paired student discussions and instructor feedback.

Purpose of the study and research questions

The purpose of this study was to compare aspiring school principals' perceptions of different instructional strategies used in principal preparation programs. Claudio Salinas (2005) notes that student perceptions of principal preparation programs are seldom documented, even though aspiring principals' suggestions for improvement tend to reflect the recommendations of experts. Di Zou and James Lambert (2017) stress "the importance of listening to students, understanding the social world of the classroom, perceiving the learning experiences of different students and developing a classroom fit for students' needs and expectations" (p. 1081). They argue that attending to student perceptions will foster the professional development of faculty members and ultimately improve student performance. This study sought to better understand students' perceptions of the instruction in a principal preparation program by answering the following research questions:

1 What value did the aspiring principals place on different types of class discussions and other types of class activities?

2 What value did the aspiring principals place on different types of course readings and other types of class assignments?

3 What value did the aspiring principals place on different instructional delivery modes (online, face-to-face, and hybrid)?

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4   What instructional strategies did aspiring principals perceive were
used by a "composite" outstanding professor of educational lead-
ership?

The goals of International Journal of Education Policy and Learning (IJEPL) in-
clude identifying best practices in teaching, learning, and leadership, and this study
sought to identify what aspiring principals considered best teaching practices (and
less effective practices) of the faculty that taught them—practices directly related to
the aspiring principals' capacity to learn and lead.

Research methods
Participants
The participants in the study included 64 master's students in a principal preparation
program at a university in the southwestern U.S. Most of the courses in the program
are delivered face-to-face, with some hybrid courses. The authors invited all students
in their classes over two academic terms to complete the surveys. The surveys were
administered during classes that met once a week for three hours, and students who
did not wish to participate were given an extended break while participants com-
pleted the survey.

Data gathering
The students were asked to complete a survey with 52 fixed-response items and five
open-ended items. The fixed-response items included eight items on specific types
of class discussions, 16 items on class activities, 19 items on out-of-class assignments,
six items on types of course readings, and three items on modes of delivery. For each
fixed-response item, the participants were asked to rate an instructional strategy on
a scale from one (the lowest rating, or the lowest value for the instructional strategy)
to five (the highest rating, or the highest value for the instructional strategy). Open-
ended items asked students to describe a particularly good class discussion they had
participated in, at least one highly successful learning activity they had participated
in, at least one out-of-class assignment that had extended their learning, and the
types of course readings that had been most valuable to them. Additionally, the stu-
dents were asked to provide a composite description of the instruction provided by
"the outstanding professor of educational leadership."

Data analysis
Descriptive statistics were used to describe the relative values that the aspiring prin-
cipals placed on the various instructional strategies used in the survey. The quanti-
tative data is presented in tables with measures of central tendency (means) and
variability (standard deviations). Qualitative analysis began with multiple readings
of responses to open-ended questions to enable an intimate familiarity with the re-
sponses. Next open coding of all responses was carried out, using complete thoughts
as the unit of analysis. The next stage of qualitative analysis involved axial coding to
identify categories and themes across the participants' responses. Throughout the
qualitative analysis, memos were written, diagrams drawn, and matrices constructed

to help better understand the data and their relationships. Quantitative and qualitative data were triangulated to verify results and assist with conclusion drawing.

Results

The results are presented under headings that correspond to the survey categories: specific types of class discussions, class activities, out-of-class assignments, course readings, instructional delivery modes, and a composite description of the outstanding professor of educational leadership. Instructional strategies with student ratings of either 4 or 5 indicated a more positive perception of those strategies, and highly rated strategies are discussed in more detail. For each category, quantitative results are presented first, followed by qualitative results. Although the quantitative and qualitative results were generally consistent with each other, in some cases when a strategy was rated low, the qualitative data revealed that the students perceived one or more *specific variations* of that strategy positively, and those results are reported on as well.

Specific types of class discussions

The list of strategies within this section, along with item means and standard deviations, are shown in Table 1. Over 50 percent of respondents provided a rating of either "4" or "5" (highest rating) to the following: discussion of how to apply the selected topic to practice (87.5%), discussion of research on the selected topic (54.7%), discussion of the student's personal experiences related to the topic (67.2 %), discussion of case studies on the topic (59.4%), and brainstorming (54.7%). Items with the lowest ratings included discussions of theories underlying the selected topic and experts' opinions on the topic.

Table 1. Specific types of class discussions

Item	Mean (n = 64) (SD)
Discussion of theories underlying selected topic	3.36 (1.01)
Discussion of how to apply selected topic to practice	4.36 (0.84)
Discussion of research on the selected topic	3.64 (0.97)
Discussion of experts' opinions on the topic	3.27 (0.90)
Discussion of students' personal experiences related to the topic	3.97 (0.98)
Discussion of case studies on the topic	3.64 (1.00)
Brainstorming	3.53 (1.28)
Open dialogue without predetermined topic	3.03 (1.56)

The qualitative data agreed with the high student rating for discussion of how to apply the selected topic to practice. One student stated, "A good class discussion I have been in has made it meaningful to me and has given me ways to apply what

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is learned." One type of application discussed by the students was discussion that led to self-improvement, or in the words of one student, "Exploring yourself and than seeing weaknesses and strengths and working on improvement."

The students' open-ended comments made it possible to identify discussion topics that students found valuable. By far, the topic most often identified by the students was equity and social justice, which included discussions on gender equity, race, ethnicity, class, and disabilities. A typical student comment follows:

> We had a great discussion last semester in Dr. _____'s class about race. It was a very intense discussion, but I believe everyone in the room gained insight into our biases and areas they needed to work on. I think all people present started to see their own prejudice and the history that they brought to the topic.

Class activities

The means and standard deviations for all items related to class activities are presented in Table Activities that received ratings of 4 or 5 from the majority of students include small-group discussion (77.7%), whole-group discussion (73.4%), demonstration (59.0%), simulation of a real-world situation (74.2%), problem-solving activity (78.1%), sharing personal/professional stories (67.2%), and learning that incorporates creative opportunities (53.2%). Lectures and long-term in-class projects were the lowest-rated class activities.

Table 2. Class activities

Item	Mean (SD)	n
Lecture	2.48 (1.31)	64
Small-group discussion	4.18 (0.89)	63
Whole-group discussion	3.98 (1.00)	64
Role-play	3.45 (1.30)	62
Demonstration	3.69 (1.03)	61
Simulation of a real-world situation	4.02 (1.18)	62
Video	3.29 (1.08)	63
Problem-solving activity	4.03 (0.99)	64
Student presentations	3.36 (1.13)	64
Panel discussion	3.21 (1.12)	62
Visiting presenter	2.93 (1.27)	59
Completing and analyzing an adult-learning or lifestyle inventory	3.42 (1.29)	62
Individuals sharing personal and professional stories	3.88 (1.05)	64
Long-term in-class group project	2.97 (1.24)	63
Learning that incorporates creative activities	3.53 (1.16)	62
Debate	3.37 (1.48)	62

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Both small-group and whole-group discussions were highly valued by the students. One student described a successful small-group discussion:

> We worked in small groups to create a life map for Santiago, the main character in "The Alchemist." The exercise we did made me view the characters experiences differently. … The activity was different, engaging, and a fun way to think about the book and plot within it.

Another student described productive whole-class discussions:

> We had several opportunities to share, in an open dialogue, our reflections and ideas about topics we read, and these were facilitated in a more or less Socratic seminar, which I found both engaging and informative. I was able to anchor my learning to those discussions, and I seemed quite able to recall details later in the course because there was more of an emotional connection to the content.

The qualitative data revealed that students also appreciated the *combination* of a small-group and large-group discussion. A representative quote follows:

> It was a discussion where we were asked to read several related articles on a topic, and the teacher allowed us to have small-group discussions, using guided questions. We then opened it up for a whole-class discussion after we were given that time to process the information with our peers.

The students also valued simulations of real-world experiences. One student shared, "I really liked the practice of clinical supervision during class. Being able to act like a supervisor, teacher, and students (during simulation of a clinical cycle) is helpful." Another student's example was, "When we did the nominal group technique in class and learned how to take a staff through a goal-setting activity." The sharing of personal or professional stories was another highly rated class activity.

The qualitative data revealed that some activities not highly rated as individual instructional strategies were deemed to be more valuable if combined with other activities. For example, role-playing was considered to be more valuable if it was followed by class discussions. Also, while adult inventories in general were not highly rated, the qualitative data revealed that the Life Styles Inventory (LSI) was perceived as valuable. In the words of one student:

> The Life Styles Inventory (LSI) was a life-changing experience, and I am so glad I was able to be part of that activity. I learned so much, as painful as some of it was, about myself, and other's perceptions of me, that I could have never learned otherwise.

Out-of-class assignments

Means and standard deviations for items on out-of-class assignments are shown in Table 3. Assignments rated as a 4 or 5 by over 50 percent of the aspiring principals include writing a reflective paper (67.2%), conducting an interview (61.9%), con-

ducting an observation (62.9%), performing leadership activities in schools (77.4%), preparing a demonstration for class (61.3%), and creating an artistic expression (53.2%). Writing a policy brief, preparing an oral report to present in class, and doing a long-term out-of-class project were the lowest rated out-of-class assignments.

Table 3. Out-of-class assignments

Item	Mean (SD)	n
Writing a reflective paper	3.84 (1.01)	64
Writing a research paper	3.02 (1.14)	62
Keeping a reflective journal over time	3.24 (1.22)	62
Writing a policy brief	2.08 (1.11)	60
Conducting an interview	3.79 (0.99)	63
Conducting an observation	3.86 (1.05)	62
Performing leadership activities in schools	4.10 (1.05)	62
Creating a video or audio recording to share in class	3.48 (1.17)	62
Preparing an oral report to present in class	2.98 (1.22)	62
Preparing a lesson to teach to colleagues	3.32 (1.12)	63
Making entries in an ongoing portfolio	3.05 (1.19)	61
Creating a poster or display to share in class	3.40 (1.30)	63
Preparing a demonstration for class	3.63 (1.06)	62
Gathering and analyzing data	3.33 (1.00)	63
Carrying out a case study	3.26 (1.20)	61
Doing a long-term out-of-class project	2.63(1.29)	60
Doing a long-term individual project	3.16 (1.27)	62
Service learning integrated with preparation program curriculum	3.35(1.09)	60
Creating an artistic expression	3.39 (1.22)	64

One student shared, "Writing reflections on our biological, historical, and political selves gave me an excellent opportunity to really consider my background and what I bring to the table as an educator. It was powerful." Conducting interviews in the field¾including interviews with principals, other educators, and community members¾ was also highly valued by the respondents. A student wrote:

> I enjoyed an assignment where I had to have conversations with other educators about a particular topic and no paper or report was assigned. This allowed me to focus 100% on the conversations and my take away on the topic.

Students also assigned high ratings to observations in the school and community. A respondent commented, "Getting out of my classroom (I'm still teaching) and performing observations of leadership activities is very useful." The most highly rated out-of-class assignment was performing leadership activities in schools. Examples

of leadership activities students had carried out included an equity audit, action research, and clinical supervision.

Although students did not assign high ratings to long-term individual projects, the qualitative data revealed that they actually had highly positive perceptions of some specific long-term projects. The most positive comments about a long-term assignment concerned student autoethnographies, with the finished products made available as videos on YouTube. One student commented:

> Creating the video extended my knowledge because it helped me to investigate myself, my values, and beliefs. Also, I was able to learn to use the software and hardware needed to create the audio-visual pieces. The process of cutting, throwing in the audio, and uploading it to YouTube was a first for me.

Another long-term project that students valued highly was the development of a community profile. A student shared the following on the project:

> We had to research a community, write a community profile paper, and then create a digital story about our research. The process was long and involved and extremely time-consuming, but I am so proud of my work on the project. I learned so much about the rich heritage of the community where I live and it has been fun to continue to share anecdotes from my research a year later.

Types of course readings

Case studies (61.3%), articles from scholarly journals (59.4%), and articles from practitioner journals (58.7%) were the items that received ratings of 4 or 5 from over 50 percent of respondents. The use of a comprehensive textbook received the lowest ratings. Means and standard deviations of all items on course readings are listed in Table 4.

Table 4. Types of course readings

Item	Mean (SD)	n
Case studies	3.63 (1.22)	62
Articles from scholarly journals	3.72 (1.00)	64
Articles from practitioner journals	3.59 (1.03)	63
A comprehensive textbook	2.84 (1.12)	63
Chapters from different textbooks	3.29 (1.04)	63
Other non-scholarly work	3.04 (1.43)	64

The aspiring principals valued case studies as reading assignments, especially if they were about schools with demographics and cultures similar to those that the students worked in or were familiar with. One student stated, "Case studies give more of a real-life overview." Another student wrote, "I love reading case studies. I learned more about deficit thinking and racial inequality from researching real-life examples than I did just reading articles." In their open-ended comments, students

who preferred journal articles often did not differentiate between scholarly and practitioner articles. A typical comment was, "Journal articles tend to be my favorite course readings because I am able to stretch my own understanding of a topic substantially."

Although textbooks received the lowest overall ratings, the qualitative data revealed that a minority of students preferred textbooks to all other types of course reading. One student stated, "I really enjoy following the sequence of a textbook. It helps me to organize my thinking better. Another student wrote, "I enjoy reading from a textbook that is meaningful and can easily be applied to my learning. I dislike reading articles that barely pertain to my course or interests." The open-ended comments revealed that some students preferred a variety of reading materials from multiple sources. A number of the students also shared that they enjoyed readings that provided a variety of perspectives on a given topic.

Instructional delivery modes

The vast majority of respondents (93.6%) assigned the face-to-face instructional delivery mode a rating of 4 or 5. The hybrid and online modes received high ratings from 43.5percent and 14.6 percent of participants, respectively. Means and standard deviations are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Instructional delivery modes

Item	Mean (*SD*)	*n*
Online	2.26 (1.25)	62
Face-to-face	4.73 (0.70)	63
Hybrid	3.23 (1.11)	62

The program does not offer entire courses online, but some hybrid courses are taught. Thus, ratings for courses taught entirely online were based either on online courses a student had taken outside of the principal preparation program, or on a student's level of desire for an online course rather than the student's actual experience in the program. These particular results need to be considered with caution. Due to this circumstance, qualitative data was not gathered on this topic.

Composite description of instruction by an outstanding professor

With the understanding that instruction cannot totally be separated from the instructor, and in an effort to move beyond isolated instructional strategies, the final open-ended item on the survey asked the students for a composite description of an "outstanding professor of educational leadership." Student responses to this item were classified into three broad categories: the personal qualities of the instructor, the positive learning environment created by the instructor, and the constructivist learning fostered by the instructor.

Personal qualities

The students' outstanding professor cares for the students, makes a personal connection with each student, and is responsive to student concerns and needs. The

students perceived the outstanding professor as having both clear and high expectations. A student wrote:

> Because so much was expected, not to mention the sheer volume of the topics covered, this class will always stand out as the one that challenged me, challenged my views, exhausted me, but helped me to grow the most during my grad school experience.

The outstanding professor was described as being highly knowledgeable of the course content and able to provide personal examples connecting the topic to school leadership. Another personal quality emphasized by the students was flexibility: they appreciated instructors who were willing to try new instructional strategies, alter lessons to focus on topics students wished to discuss, adapt syllabi to better meet student needs, and adjust the pace of a class to accommodate students' learning styles. Specific pedagogical skills mentioned by the students included planning, technology, discussion, and group facilitation skills.

Creates positive learning environment

When describing an outstanding professor, one student noted, "The best thing he did was to create a safe, positive, sharing environment—gracious space." Another student describing a positive learning environment created by an instructor wrote, "Students felt validated and safe to share." An additional aspect of a positive learning environment described by students was the instructor's use of a variety of learning and assessment methods, with at least some level of student choice regarding which method to use. Some examples of how students described such variety are:

- This professor integrated a variety of methods: readings, videos, demonstrations, and role-playing.
- Various instructional methods were used: small groups, whole-class debates, bringing in books from outside of class, cell phone apps.
- This professor offered a wide variety of [assessment] activities, ranging from article reviews to papers to posters and other media.

Constructivist learning

The outstanding professor described by the students caused students to interact with course content by probing the students' thinking about ideas presented. A representative student comment was:

> I believe the reflections, readings, and discussions forced our class to dive more deeply into what we believe and why we believe it. He was not easy, but it was very relaxed, I appreciated his questions and provoking us to think!

The students' outstanding professor asked them to consider various viewpoints from the literature, and based on the critique and examination of those viewpoints, construct their own leadership beliefs and strategies. Another aspect of constructivist learning described by the students was the interaction among students, and between professors and students, resulting in the co-construction of knowledge. The outstanding professor continuously asked students to share their ideas and reflect upon

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each other's ideas. Finally, the students' outstanding professor made, and asked students to make, connections between theory and practice. A typical comment was that the outstanding professor "knew how to involve students in meaningful and relevant learning activities that would be applicable to their future role of educational leader."

Discussion

These comparisons of student perceptions of various instructional strategies demonstrate a clear contrast, with students dismissing the instructor-centered lectures of the past and expressing preference for discussion-based and activity-oriented instruction. With few exceptions, the students in this study valued opportunities to engage in dialogue with colleagues about critical topics and determine plausible, purposeful, and pragmatic application to leadership practice. The discussion below is presented under headings that parallel the research questions and results.

Class discussion

The educational leadership students in this study welcomed opportunities to share their beliefs and values with their colleagues. These aspiring leaders also appreciated opportunities to examine and even question those values and beliefs. Additionally, they preferred discussions that connected selected topics to practice. The students embraced opportunities to relate topics to their personal experiences, and appreciated discussions that gave all students a voice and ownership in the learning process. The students revealed that opportunities to discuss research that informed leadership practice were important, with case studies deemed particularly relevant. Student responses indicated the value of discussions in applying research in school settings.

Class activities

Students in this study largely preferred active learning to passive learning. Active learning allows students to frame issues, engage in problem solving, and collaboratively test theories of action in a safe environment. Simulation, for example, was an active-learning strategy highly valued by students. Simulations took students close to real-world environments, while simultaneously providing a layer of protection. Simulations also provided context (historical, political, cultural, etc.) that enhanced aspiring leaders' ability to analyze factors that contribute to educational and community inequities. The use of simulations to foster public learning in safe environments yielded benefits such as those discussed by Dotger (2011); they spurred a commitment to initiate the instructional and structural change necessary for continuous school improvement and improved learning for all students (Hallinger, 2003; Marks & Printy, 2003). Finally, students preferred opportunities for both telling and reflecting upon their personal and professional stories. The use of story, especially stories about the students' personal and professional growth, indicates that students value leadership preparation focused on adult learning and career development.

Out-of-class assignments

Reflective writing was one strategy that helped students focus on experiences and practices that promote leadership capacity building, sustain development of school

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culture, and contribute to positive school outcomes. Reflective writing was integrated with other strategies to connect student experiences with the topic at hand. Additionally, reflective writing linked the topic being considered to past and current student experiences and helped them to anticipate what they would encounter in their future leadership roles. The autoethnography was an assignment that seems to have been an especially powerful learning tool because it incorporated many of the above strategies; specifically, it promoted self-understanding within the context of the student's personal history and social environment. Students also indicated that they valued opportunities to share their out-of-class learning with others.

Study findings regarding the power of field experiences are consistent with widespread recommendations to increase the number and quality of such experiences (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, & Orr, 2007). Field experiences embedded in coursework allow for weekly face-to-face interaction with the course professor and with fellow students engaged in the same or similar field activities. This strategy may be the best avenue to the type of praxis championed by scholars such as Gail Furman (2012). The action research that the master's students in this study carried out allowed many of them their first opportunity to engage in practice-based research, and provided the chance for students to improve their educational settings while learning how to conduct such research.

Course readings

This study's results indicate that reading case studies that integrate theory and practice are powerful tools for developing school leaders. The students also assigned moderately high values to readings from scholarly and practitioner journals. Given the wide variety of quality journals on educational leadership, it seems that the selection and processing of relevant articles should be a priority for leadership preparation.

Different instructional delivery modes (online, live, and hybrid)

Online learning allows the delivery of instruction to students at a distance, can augment face-to-face classes, and can even simulate field experiences in K–12 schools. However, this form of instruction was less valued than face-to-face instruction by the students in this study. Students' preference for face-to-face classes can be attributed to their desire to connect directly with their professors and peers in a communal setting. As previously mentioned, this finding must be viewed with caution because the students who were surveyed are almost exclusively enrolled in face-to-face classes.

Conclusion

Based on the results of this study, utilizing instructional strategies that allow students to reflect on schools, leadership, and their own current and future practice within a safe environment is advisable. The learning environment should also enhance a working knowledge of schools as systems capable of establishing and sustaining communication and collaboration with all stakeholders. Leadership preparation programs matter. Highly effective leadership preparation programs can be recognized by the instruction they provide, their influence on aspiring principals, and most importantly,

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the performance of graduates as school leaders (Orr & Pounder, 2008). This study supports the use of a variety of active and interactive instructional strategies within a supportive and safe learning environment, including deep discussions that create synergistic weaving of course content. Finally, the results of this study suggest that the practice of creating opportunities for individuals to contribute to their own learning and the learning of their peers is essential to leadership preparation.

On a more general level, additional recommendations are made for faculty members, program accreditation agencies, and school districts. First, encouraging students to assess instructional strategies used in principal preparation programs will have little value if faculty members do not act on those assessments. As Karen Gresty, Troy Heffernan, Wei Pan, and Andrew Edwards-Jones (2015) argue, "if students are to be encouraged to play a more prominent role in assessing their own academic experiences, it falls to individual academics to adopt appropriate teaching styles and to be reflective of their effectiveness" (p. 40). Regarding accreditation agencies, one implication is the need to seek more feedback from students during the reaccreditation process, and another is to place more emphasis on assessing instructional strategies and the relationship between those strategies and student outcomes. Finally, school districts within the service area of more than one principal preparation program can seek information on the quality of instruction in those programs¾from principals who are graduates of the programs and aspiring principals enrolled in the programs¾and advise teachers in the district considering entering a preparation program accordingly. With the increasing emphasis on school-university partnerships in principal preparation, university faculty members, district leaders from partner districts, and district principals that have graduated from the preparation program can collaborate with district educators enrolled in the program to identify effective instructional strategies and work to incorporate those strategies in the program.

An approach that seeks to understand what is valued by aspiring school leaders, both in terms of what they learn and how they learn it (two factors that cannot really be separated), is one step in bridging conceptual models of leadership preparation with the graduate classroom. This approach can assist in critiquing traditional leadership preparation and, in particular, reflecting on the specific instructional strategies used to develop school leaders.

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