The Scholar-Practitioner: Problems of Practice Identified by Aspiring School Leaders

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Principal preparation programs must work to develop scholar-practitioners. This will help to ensure that school leaders are able to use research methodologies to examine problems of practice, make critical data-based decisions toward positive change, and effectively implement research-based practices to drive school improvement. With this in mind, we examined 44 aspiring school leaders' final projects within a master's-level research course in which they were asked to identify a problem of practice in education and write a research proposal that delineated how they could potentially study that problem of practice. Through a content analysis, five themes were identified: (a) Let's Collaborate, (b) Improve Student Achievement, (c) Create a Safe Learning Environment, (d) Use a Diversity Lens, and (e) Enhance Leadership Behavior. Within these themes, unique distinctions were evidenced between male and female aspiring school principals. A discussion of these findings and distinctions is provided, along with implications for principal preparation programs.

Keywords: aspiring school leader, scholar-practitioner, content analysis, principal preparation

In a recent call for improvement among principal preparation programs, the Wallace Foundation (2016) highlighted key aspects of high-quality programs. Among those key aspects, the creation of opportunities in which aspiring school leaders can make connections among their field experiences, research, theory, and practice "appears to better prepare principals to lead and impact change" (Campanotta, Simpson, Newton, 2018, p. 227). In particular, when principal preparation programs are able to develop scholar-practitioners, school leaders use core values of the community, democracy, social justice, caring, and equity to create change within their school settings (Schultz, 2010). However, programs of educational leadership and administration often focus on developing the scholar-practitioner only for those seeking doctoral degrees (Bowers, 2017), rather than for those who are seeking a master's degree with the aim of becoming a school principal.

To serve as a school principal, a master's degree is typically required for the role, and principals are increasingly tasked with leading and creating a continuous cycle of improvement with research-based practices. This cycle of improvement necessitates a deep understanding of the intersection between research and practice. Consequently, there is a need to better understand aspiring school leaders' perspectives on current problems of practice and how they propose to study such problems through research. This strengthened understanding will support improvement among principal preparation programs in order to better develop school leaders who can serve as scholar-practitioners and enact educational change. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine aspiring school principals' perspectives on current problems of practice and their proposed study for research.

The Scholar-Practitioner

According to Schultz (2010), "The call for educational leaders who utilize scholarship via inquiry of, in, and for practice brings us to the label of the *scholar-practitioner*" (p. 53). The author affirms that the scholar-practitioner within an educational leadership setting is able to use inquiry to guide efforts, generate knowledge, and impact current practice for more equitable outcomes. Hampton (2010) added that scholar-practitioners take action to create change, rather than just believing that a need for change exists, and challenge the status quo.

Given this focus on change, Bailey (2014) indicated that the scholar-practitioner is able to combine theory and practice to "create a powerful precept for action" (p. 48). The author recognized that this lens is essential in today's school leadership in order to confront multiple challenges, such as local concerns or mandated requirements that urge for difficult reform processes. It is these types of demands within the principalship that have led to calls for improvements in school leadership preparation programs. For example, Malen (2017) discussed the integration of research apprenticeships in preparation programs and found improvements in candidate preparation while enhancing the capacity of school systems for improvement. Ultimately, a shift from the traditional scholar model to a one that develops scholar-practitioners within principal preparation programs can support the ongoing need for school change and potentially yield positive school outcomes (Mansfield & Stacy, 2017).

While messaging within principal preparation programs may often include aspects related to the need to adapt to and address educational change, programs also need to make necessary changes to support current expectations. Faculty and other leaders within principal preparation programs should be modeling effective practices of leadership, including the ability to function within a cycle of continuous improvement. To that end, improvement efforts should include

strategies by which to better prepare school principals for the demands of the role. One strategy may include a focus on the development of scholar-practitioners.

Background

The dynamic transformation of a principal preparation program, which stemmed from a university-district collaborative, was launched during the spring of 2017 at a land-grant university in the Western United States. The dynamic transformation included a focus on using a cycle of continuous improvement, while also aiming to develop scholar-practitioners. Key areas of the transformation and partnership included: the identification of foundational needs, strategic involvement of specific stakeholders, a complete course sequence redesign, the use of a student-cohort model, as well as an extensive course and syllabi revision process, implementation of a co-teaching model, a revised internship, and a newly implemented culminating experience (Blinded Authors, in press).

One particular course, Educational Leadership (EL) 747 Research Analysis and Development, was specifically implemented with the aim to develop scholar-practitioners within the principal preparation program. The course was co-taught by a university faculty member and two school principals. All aspects of the course took place as a mutually co-taught effort, meaning the individuals delivered instruction together within the same space (Cook & Friend, 1995), and all efforts related to the course planning, organization, delivery, and assessment were designed to blend university theory with school practices (Bacharach, Heck, & Dahlberg, 2008). Two cohorts of graduate students (i.e., aspiring school leaders) successfully completed the required program course during the summers of 2017 and 2018. Both cohorts of students were asked to complete a final project in which the aspiring school leaders were asked to identify a problem of practice in education and write a research proposal that delineated how they could potentially study that problem of practice. During course facilitation, the co-instructors believed in the power of modeling the scholar-practitioner lens and became increasingly interested in examining what problems of practice aspiring school leaders identified, as well as how individuals proposed to study those problems and whether other unique distinctions might exist among the aspiring school leaders. These areas of inquiry resulted in the current study.

Method

The purpose of this study was to examine aspiring school principals' perspectives on current problems of practice and their proposed study for research. The study was designed using the scholar-practitioner lens to gain a stronger understanding about how principal candidates' work (based on a final project) could reflect the application of this particular lens. Qualitative content analysis was used as a guide for this research study. The use of content analysis has been dated as far back as the18th century (Rosengren, 1981), and is a method used to analyze text data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Notably, Weber (1990) indicated that qualitative content analysis serves to classify large amounts of text into categories, with an extension beyond simply counting words. Therefore, the "interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" was used for the purpose of this study (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). This analysis was conducted on 44 existing records from a principal preparation master's course, EL 747 Research Development and Analysis, that were obtained from the final project assignment submissions as Word documents. The research questions that guided

this study were: What problems of practice do aspiring principals identify? How are the problems of practice proposed to be studied? Do male and female aspiring principals' identified problems of practice differ? How do the identified problems reflect current issues in education?

Data Source

These final project assignment submissions in the form of Word documents served as the data source for this study. For the assignment, the aspiring school leaders were asked to keep their audience in mind and the ability to communicate their research effectively. They needed to include a clear description of their: (a) finalized problem of practice, (b) most relevant literature, (c) research methodology and methods, and (d) a cohesive conclusion that tied the document together. Upon gaining approval from the university's institutional review board to access the documents for research purposes, a third-party faculty member served as an independent individual who deidentified each document. The individual deidentified each document by removing the first name on the student's title page and replacing it with an "F" for female or "M" for male. Each original file was replaced as a new document labeled as Document 1, Document 2…Document 44. From the deidentified documents, the information that was recorded included the graduate students' gender label, the identified problem of practice, and the proposed methods used to study the identified problem of practice, all of which were used to inform the research questions for this study.

Data Analysis

After obtaining the deidentified data of the 44 existing document records, both researchers collaboratively reviewed Documents 1- 6 to calibrate and ensure consistency in entering data necessary for this study. During this first phase of analysis, the two researchers specifically focused on the accuracy of data entry into an Excel sheet for the gender label, potential identification of the problem of practice, grade level of focus for the research, and each document's listed method for studying the problem. Upon confirming consistent data entry needs, each researcher separately entered data for the remaining 38 documents (i.e., each recording information for 19 existing documents). After document review and data entry, the second phase of analysis focused on the use of template coding, or a priori coding. A priori coding was determined by establishing codes that represented relatively broad research themes that could reflect current topics of educational problems of practice (Blair, 2015). The identified codes included: instruction, student behavior, adult behavior, professional development, professional learning communities (PLCs), collaboration, achievement, and diversity to examine aspiring school leaders' identified problems of practice.

Additionally, a priori coding for the proposed methodology to study the problem included qualitative, quantitative, and action research, as well as the design or method, as directly noted in the final project's text. These three codes were determined because they constituted the majority of the content learned in the course. Mixed-methods was discussed in the course at an introductory level, so students were discouraged from pursuing that particular method in their final project, and therefore, excluded in the coding for this study.

The third phase of the content analysis focused on reflexivity. Because reflexivity is allowed in template coding (Blair, 2015), coding was reviewed individually (19 documents each that remained after calibration coding of 6 documents) and then holistically (across all 44

documents) together and engaged in reflexivity. This provided an opportunity for several revisions to be made to the initial coding. For example, the instruction code was determined to clearly be embedded within other codes depending on the focus of instruction. In an effort to ensure codes were mutually exclusive, that code was removed and data were redistributed across appropriately representative codes. Similarly, we determined that the codes of professional development and PLCs encompassed a focus on collaboration, so those two codes were transformed into one code for collaboration. Lastly, the code of adult behavior more accurately focused on behavior focused on the school leader, so that code was changed to leadership behavior. Ultimately, this final coding stage led to the identification of the study's themes.

Considerations

While additional cohorts have been selected under this new program model, this study is limited to the two cohorts of students who completed EL 747 within the last two years, which resulted in 44 final project documents used for analysis. Student background characteristics, demographics beyond gender, or other forms of student data were not used as part of the analysis, which could provide additional information about the identified problems of practice, patterns, and connections to current issues. The results of this study are not generalizable beyond the scope of this work, but they do provide a snapshot view into the potential ways by which ongoing principal program preparation needs may be enhanced. An additional limitation may be that specific work site, district initiatives, or administrator support may have influenced the aspiring school principals' selected problem of practice.

Findings

The content analysis of the final project assignment revealed unique findings in the aspiring school leaders' identified problems of practice. The themes identified were: (a) Collaborate Effectively, (b) Improve Student Achievement, (c) Create a Safe Learning Environment, (d) Use a Diversity Lens, and (e) Enhance Leadership Behavior. The themes were mutually exclusive, which supported our efforts to identify how many of the projects focused on each particular theme, as well as how these themes varied by aspiring school leaders' grade-level and gender demographics.

Collaborate Effectively

The theme, Collaborate Effectively, was identified as a problem of practice among 14 of the 44 final projects. A majority of the projects that focused on this theme uniquely emphasized PLCs as the primary problem of practice. Aspiring school leaders framed this as a problem by indicating that there tends to be a misunderstanding of effective PLCs, which contribute to a lack of cohesion among educators and impacts critical school needs for improvement. To illustrate, one aspiring school leader wrote, "There can be inconsistency in the development and implementation [of PLCs]. It's not a simple task to implement the PLC process but it is a valuable one." Other projects within this theme indicated that collaboration was a problem of practice because PLC ineffectiveness influences teacher burnout, stress, and, ultimately, impacts teacher retention. Several projects highlighted the responsibility of functioning as a PLC to successfully support professional learning practice, impact critical student growth, and enhance research-based

strategies. One project, in particular, framed the problem as requiring specific school leadership involvement to lead effective collaboration efforts.

Improve Student Achievement

The theme of Improve Student Achievement was identified as a concerning problem of practice among 11 of the 44 projects. Notably, while most projects discussed achievement as an end-result to positively changing a problem of practice, the projects within this theme focused on a specific component of student achievement. For example, one project focused on whether the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) could be used for English-only students to enhance literacy in similar ways that it can be used to address the needs of English learners. Another project, however, emphasized that high school students within career and technical education (CTE) pathways are difficult to retain within CTE programs and how the shortage of teachers who specialize in a particular CTE field may be contributing to the issue. In connecting the research to practice, this aspiring school leader wrote, "A thorough literature review revealed that research about student retention rates in CTE is severely lacking." Other projects focused on areas such as grade inflation, homework policies, teacher accountability, employed students, and parent involvement as components that influence efforts to improve student achievement.

Create a Safe Learning Environment

The need to Create a Safe Learning Environment was just behind that of student achievement, with 10 of the 44 projects honing in on this area. Most of the projects within this theme focused on a particular aspect of student discipline. For example, one project focused on teacher duty schedules and the disproportionality it creates with student discipline issues; whereas, other projects focused in cell phone policies, tardiness, and absenteeism as aspects that hinder the creation of a safe learning environment for students. A few other projects highlighted essential strategies, such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) to examine the existing problem of practice, along with teacher-student relationships, or even exploring school start-time adjustments to remedy student discipline concerns and create a safe learning environment. For example, the aspiring school leader focused on start times indicated cited research and concluded that, "earlier start times may result in fewer hours of sleep, as students may not fully compensate for earlier rise times with earlier bedtimes. Activities such as sports and work, along with family and social schedules, may make it difficult for students to adjust the time they go to bed."

Use a Diversity Lens

Several projects narrowed in on problem of practice related to diversity. The framing of the projects specifically addressed a need to use a diversity lens in 7 of the 44 projects. Aspiring school leaders who focused on this area tended to highlight specific needs of unique subgroups. For instance, one project aimed to examine Latino parental involvement at the high school level; whereas, another project centered on at-risk, third-graders, common assessments, and the role of a math coach. For the most part, these projects focused on existing programs in school settings, such as a two-way immersion program of English Language Learners, independent living settings for 18-22 year-old students with disabilities, and physical education teachers' preparation needs as related to supporting students who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ communities.

Enhance Leadership Behavior

Only two of the 44 projects focused on leadership behavior as a problem of practice. One of the projects shared that principals are tasked with serving as instructional leaders, but that there is major variation as to how that role is interpreted and what serving as an instructional leader actually requires. This aspiring school leader, for example, argued, "As emphasis in instructional leadership continues to develop, it is imperative for educators to understand whether instructional leadership has a direct impact on student achievement." The project disclosed that too many interpretations for instructional leader creates large variations among leadership demands and, essentially, impacts other important school factors. The second project focused on leadership behaviors, but the problem of practice was that the principals' behavior has a direct impact on teacher attrition. The purpose of this proposed project was to be able to identify key leadership behaviors that might lessen teacher attrition.

Proposed Methodology, Grade Level, and Gender

Along with identification of a problem of practice, students were required to select methodology and method, or design, to research the problem. With regards to the proposed methodology to examine the identified problem of practice, a majority of the final projects included a focus on qualitative research, with 26 of 44 projects using a qualitative methodology. The majority of qualitative methodologies selected a case study design, and other projects narrowed in on grounded theory, narratives, and phenomenology. Conversely, the 18 remaining projects reflected a quantitative methodology to examine the identified problem of practice. For these, the projects primarily included a correlational approach; although, some projects focused on survey research, group comparisons using chi-square and t-tests, and causal-comparative designs.

In reference to the grade-level focus of the problem of practice, elementary and secondary levels were fairly balanced, with 21 and 19, respectively, out of the 44 projects. For three of the projects, no grade level indication was found through the content analysis. Additionally, the analysis revealed that 32 of 44 final projects were developed by females, while the remaining 12 records pertained to males.

Other Unique Distinctions

The grade-level and gender demographics revealed an important lens into additional distinctions among the final projects submitted by aspiring school leadership. For example, when examining gender against the identified problems of practice, the themes were generally identified by both male and female aspiring school leaders. However, two themes were not proportionally balanced by gender. Specifically, the theme of Safety was identified as a problem of practice among eight female graduate students, while only two male graduate students used this theme. In addition, a much larger and disproportional distinction was found within the theme of Collaboration, with 12 females identifying this as a problem of practice and only two males. A gender disproportionality was also clear when examining the chosen methodology; specifically, while 26 of 44 final projects were qualitative, 21 of those were proposed by females. Lastly, a large distinction was also found by grade level and theme; nine of the final projects that focused on Collaboration as a problem of practice were situated within the elementary school level, whereas two that focused on

Collaboration were centered at the secondary school level. The remaining identified problems of practice were proportionally distributed across grade levels.

Discussion

The identified themes from this study point to significant, current trends in education. For example, Burns et al. (2018) affirmed that "working in teams has become an integral part of being an educator (p. 394). These teams may be structured horizontally, vertically, and as learning communities, for example. Indeed, PLCs are widely used for reform efforts toward school improvement, with a culture of collaboration serving as critical component (Thessin, 2015). Certainly, PLCs are widely known as a model for learning communities, and the aspiring school leaders' projects in this study tended to focus on collaboration, particularly through PLCs, as a problem of practice. This also points to their recognition in practice related to challenges of PLCs, which mirror existing research noting that challenges to develop and sustain PLCs are very apparent (Jones, Stall, & Yarbrough, 2013). Through the aspiring school leaders' identification of this problem of practice, it appears they find collaboration as an essential aspect of successful school leadership, but they are also aware that current efforts need support to implement effective forms of collaboration that impact change.

Perhaps the most significant component of change, particularly with today's accountability demands for school leaders, is that of student achievement. To that end, PLCs have been linked to student achievement, especially when focused on collaborative leadership processes (Burns et al., 2018). Therefore, the aspiring school leaders' second theme of student achievement also aligned with this current trend in education. However, the specificity for the focus on student achievement led to the identification of program needs, strategies, and implementation efforts. This aligns with Leithwood's (2018) work highlighting that principals' have important qualities and carry out practices that influence school improvement efforts. It appears that aspiring school leaders may reflect an understanding of existing research-based practices that are being implemented, and they were broadening that understanding to focus on needs of specific subgroups or populations that need additional educational support.

Whether it is to enhance educational support for student achievement or improve upon collaborative efforts, the aspiring school leaders' next theme of safety needs can also assist in these efforts. Similar to the focus on student achievement, it seems that the aspiring school leaders were able to identify key subsets of safety needs that warrant attention to promote school improvement. Notably, Saracho (2017) acknowledges there are principles of protecting and establishing a safe environment in schools, with focus on bullying, for instance. However, the areas of concern among the aspiring school leaders included more specific disciplinary efforts related to classroom achievement, including policies focused on cell phones, tardiness, and absenteeism. These unique areas of emphasis can demonstrate that aspiring school leaders identify topics in which changes in policies and unique supports for students could continue to drive positive, student achievement. Leithwood (2018) argues that policy-driven reform is largely dependent upon principals' responses to specific policy initiatives.

Interestingly, the themes of diversity and leadership appeared to be in the background of the aspiring school leaders' identified problems of practice. It is difficult to determine why the themes were not as prominent as the others in these projects, but it could be that the aspiring school leaders need more experience and exposure to existing diversity needs in education. Additionally,

it could also be that their current backgrounds as educators serve as a limitation to examining leadership needs from a research-based perspective.

Intriguing findings, particularly by gender, grade-level, theme, and methodology are also important to consider. For example, an important distinction is that more females focused on the theme of collaboration, which aligns with existing research on how women lead organizations, such as that women lead in a more participative manner than men (Northouse, 2018). Moreover, it was also revealed that this focus on the need for improved collaborative efforts was within the elementary-level setting, which supports that collaboration tends to be more frequent at the elementary level than the secondary level (Ronfeldt, Farmer, McQueen, & Grissom, 2015). In addition, the majority of projects used a qualitative methodology to explore problems of practice, as opposed to considering quantitative methodologies. This could potentially provide insight about aspiring school leaders' levels of discomfort with the use of data or potentially being data-averse. Moreover, gender issues could be of concern with the apparent disproportionally of aspiring female school leaders who did not consider a quantitative methodology. Lastly, a focus on action research as a methodology was visibly lacking. Purely from an anecdotal perspective, but worth noting, it could be that the course content of action research is discussed last in the course sequence, so perhaps the delivery of information is too late in the process for students to consider action research as a means to conduct a study on a problem of practice. Perhaps, having a strong focus on action research would serve to support the intended course emphasis on the scholar-practitioner.

Implications for Practice

Principal preparation programs must prepare our future school leaders to embrace and conduct research within their school settings. The scholar-practitioner lens will strengthen opportunities for school improvement within today's demands of school accountability and increased student achievement. This study provided a lens into aspiring school leaders' identified problems of practice and their proposed methods for studying such issues. However, these efforts must be encouraged early on in principal preparation programs, so that school leaders can be ready to explore, conduct, and implement research-based practices in their school settings. Overall, it appears that aspiring school leaders tend to identify problems of practice that do exist in current educational settings, but there is some concern with the lack of focus that appeared in their diversity lens and leadership focus. While these could be areas that could be strengthened as aspiring school leaders shift into actual leadership roles, it is important for principal preparation programs to proactively emphasize diversity and leadership within their coursework and field experiences. At the same time, it is difficult to determine whether the aspiring school leaders' sense of autonomy or choice influenced their decision-making process in identifying existing problems of practice.

Further Research

Further research on the ways in which aspiring school leaders identify problems of practice and propose to conduct research studies can provide insight about the scholar-practitioner in school leadership. While this study only focused on 44 existing documents, an increase in data sources, as well as aspiring school leader demographics would provide more in-depth knowledge and context about this topic. Also, the content analysis could be augmented with qualitative interviews

or focus groups to gain a better understanding of how aspiring school leaders make meaning of problems of practice and the ways available to explore topic areas. Lastly, a longitudinal mix-method study focused on current school leaders and how they identify problems of practice, while working to resolve them, would provide further insight for the scholar-practitioner lens with a strong intersection of research and practice.

Conclusions

It is essential for principal preparation programs to encourage the scholar-practitioner lens among aspiring school leaders. Through this lens, future school leaders will be better equipped with the tools and ability to promote ongoing cycles of continuous improvement for PK-12 students and staff. The scholar-practitioner lens needs to begin taking place in master's-level coursework, rather than only at the doctoral level. These future leaders will be required to identify and provide potential solutions for problems or concerns at their sites. As they learn to interpret the current literature in the field, they will be able to connect site-based needs with the relevant research and, then, design site-based research projects. In order for this to occur, aspiring leaders need to have a basic level of understanding and ability to: design projects using appropriate research methods and designs, collect and analyze data, draw conclusions, and develop and monitor next steps.

Additional insight into how such master's-level, aspiring school leaders identify existing problems of practice and how they propose to examine such issues is needed. It may also be illuminating to understand how aspiring administrators' selection of problems of practice may be influenced by their professional experiences, demographics, school levels, and mentor principals' input. This increased understanding could be used to better support principal preparation program design efforts, enhance the way in which aspiring leaders are guided in their coursework, and model a cycle of continuous improvement with which schools and stakeholders could reap the benefits.

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