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Evidence-Based Leadership Preparation Program Practices: From the Perceptions of Georgia Rural School Leaders

Kristen N. Dickens
Georgia Southern University, kdickens@georgiasouthern.edu

Juliann Sergi McBrayer
Georgia Southern University, jmcbrayer@georgiasouthern.edu

Summer Pannell
Stephen F. Austin State University, summer.pannell@sfasu.edu

Katherine Fallon
Georgia Southern University, kf10548@georgiasouthern.edu

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Evidence-Based Leadership Preparation Program Practices: From the Perceptions of Georgia Rural School Leaders

Abstract

Phenomenological analysis was used to explore Georgia rural school principals' lived experiences of effective school leadership preparedness. Four overarching themes were found: productive/favorable leadership preparation program culture, bridge theory and practice in educational leadership preparation program, multicultural competencies for practice, and recommendations for effective principal preparation. The findings revealed that school leaders need increased experiential learning opportunities, increased assignments applicable to daily leader tasks, and increased cultural awareness and diversity training in their preparation programs. Principal preparation programs should work with school districts to provide purposeful, collaborative, and sustainable professional learning to prepare competent school leaders. Further research includes recruiting more rural school principals to share their experiences and perceptions with principal preparation program providers in an effort to advance aspiring principal training. Implications for practice include equipping aspiring principals with the knowledge and skills to lead for equity to continue to have a pipeline of effective school leaders to serve in Georgia's traditionally underserved areas.

Keywords

rural school leadership, educational leadership preparation, school leadership, principal pipeline

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Introduction

I don't remember too many of the books I read...I remember the discussions more than anything else. (Participant Richard)

Educational leadership programs are charged with preparing caring, competent, committed, and culturally responsive school leaders. All 50 states have adopted standards for school leader licensure, and each state has adopted its own set of requirements for school leader certification. Since many states offer a reciprocal educator license to those who hold certification from other states, educational leadership preparation programs are faced with the challenge of preparing school leaders, not only for their state but nationwide. However, with widely varying principal preparation requirements from state to state, diverse school populations, and unique circumstances at state, region, and community levels, educational leadership preparation programs are challenged to effectively prepare leaders who are ready to lead in a multitude of contexts.

Although there is a guiding set of national standards for principals, each state has adopted its own set of state standards and licensure requirements for school leaders. According to Gordon & Niemiec (2020), the requirements vary in regard to teaching requirements, degree requirements, field experiences, and assessments. The authors noted 37 states require teaching experience, 37 states require a master's degree, 33 states require a written assessment, portfolio, or both for licensure, while 15 states require no assessment or portfolio. Additionally, 39 states and the District of Columbia have adopted alternative pathways to school leadership licensure. Further complicating the field of educational leadership preparation is the diversity in today's schools. Districts differ in terms of socioeconomic status, diverse ethnicities and cultures, and varying school locales, all of which present their own unique circumstances and challenges.

Review of the Literature

There is widespread recognition that school principals have a significant impact on school performance, and the role of the educational leadership preparation program is to equip aspiring principals with the knowledge and skills to lead schools to academic success as well as help them develop the dispositions to become effective leaders of people. However, consensus among most stakeholder groups is these preparation programs are falling short in adequately

preparing principals for the demands of the role (Pannell et al., 2015). As the dynamics of the school environment rapidly change in the United States, educational leadership programs struggle to bridge the gaps between theory and practice in the principal role, and many programs fail to adequately embed and assess dispositions as part of their preparation practices. Thus, effective principal preparation warrants further research.

Connecting Theory to Practical Application in Educational Leadership

There is no doubt that leadership significantly impacts school success. Principals perform specific key functions that influence school outcomes including leading the vision and goal development of academic success for all students, creating a welcoming and safe learning environment, cultivating leadership in others, promoting teacher development, and managing people, data, and processes that promote school improvement (Young et al., 2017). Thompson (2017) identified the effective school principal as a *leader of leaders* who could empower people and direct processes towards the achievement of goals.

Research links leadership preparation to practice (Young et al., 2017), and the overwhelming consensus is that educational leadership preparation programs have failed to effectively prepare 21st-century principals for the demands of today's job (Pannell et al., 2015; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Pannell and McBrayer (2020) asserted novice principals often have a *leadership gap* without sufficient opportunities to apply the knowledge gained through educational leadership coursework to real-world school settings. Bertrand and Rodela (2017) suggested dismantling traditional structures of educational leadership and re-envisioning leadership preparation. Georgia is one such state that realized the potential to help bridge the gap between leadership theory and practice, having developed tiered levels of educational leadership certification and restructuring field experience requirements to balance the transfer of knowledge with meaningful immersion in practice for the specified levels.

According to Georgia Professional Standards Commission (GaPSC, 2020), the newly adopted tiered educational leadership certification in Georgia requires leaders to first attain Tier I certification at the master's level before attaining Tier II certification at the Educational Specialist (Ed.S.) or doctoral (Ed.D./Ph.D.) level even if they have an advanced degree beyond the masters (i.e., Ed.S., Ed.D., Ph.D.) in another area. Tier I certification is for those seeking administrative positions below the Principal and positions whose duties and responsibilities do not include supervising the Principal. The self-selected Tier I certification program does not require candidates to be in leadership positions but

have the support of the Principal to serve in a leadership role by engaging in leadership activities to meet the GaPSC program requirements of attaining 250 supervised field experience hours and achieving passing scores on two assessments, educational leadership and ethics. Alternatively, Tier II certification requires candidates to be actively serving in a leadership position in a school or district, increases the field experience requirement to 750 hours of leadership activities, and requires candidates to pass three assessments, educational leadership, ethics, and the Performance Assessment for School Leaders (PASL). Tier II certification requirements ensure that candidates have ample opportunities to engage in authentic, immersive leadership activities and the chance to exhibit practical application of the knowledge and skills gained through coursework.

Effective Leadership Preparation Program Practices

With growing bodies of research linking principals' effectiveness to the quality of their educational leadership preparation program and school outcomes, it is no surprise that educational leadership has become an area of focus for researchers and policymakers. Substantial research supports the notion that leadership is the second most influential school-related factor to student outcomes, second only to the classroom teacher (Pannell et al., 2015; Preston & Barnes, 2017). Young et al. (2017) noted that principals impact teacher practice by providing instructional advice, allocating necessary resources for learning and development, offering professional learning opportunities, establishing a culture of trust, and prioritizing equity. Student success is directly and indirectly affected by these impacts, primarily in the way of principals facilitating patterns for teachers to utilize the promotion of student interaction and development within the classroom (Pendola & Fuller, 2018). With so much authority, responsibility, and discretion for creating the very conditions and supports that promote student achievement it is imperative that programs utilize evidence-based, best practices in the preparation of school leaders (Hitt & Tucker, 2016).

Research has identified critical components of effective educational leadership programs including enhanced entrance criteria, university courses focused on instructional leadership, cohort models for added support, university-district partnerships, district evaluations, and authentic, high-quality field-based experiences (Pannell & McBrayer, 2020; Stewart & Matthews, 2018). Further, Pannell et al. (2015) noted effective principals should be able to inspire teachers to develop engaging lessons and create a culture of high expectations for all. Collaboration with teachers is imperative to work toward establishing organizational goals and emphasizing the importance of cohesive, unified efforts to support student achievement (Eckert, 2019). Given the uniqueness of each

community and the importance of fostering relationships within them, university-district partnerships might be the most critical component of effective preparation (Klocko & Justis, 2019). These partnerships would allow school districts opportunities to identify candidates with the potential leadership skills to become the type of leaders needed to address the challenges found within their districts. Further, the partnerships would provide more authentic and relevant field experience opportunities as university faculty could work with district personnel to ensure field experiences are high-quality, progressive opportunities to engage in tasks relevant to preparing effective school leaders. Lastly, educational leadership preparation programs and school districts could work together to assess and develop candidate leadership dispositions, which are often overlooked in educational leadership preparation programs.

Georgia's Rural Schools

According to the Center for American Progress (2020), Georgia is experiencing a population boom that some argue has the state at a demographic *tipping point*. With a current population of over 10.5 million residents, the state has grown roughly 18 percent since 2000, and the non-white population has grown to 34 percent, nearly doubling the size. These numbers place Georgia seventh on the list of states with the largest non-white population across the nation and second among southern states. Further, the non-white population is expected to, again, double by the year 2050, raising Georgia's non-white population to 68 percent statewide (Statistical Atlas, 2020). This growth will continue to significantly impact Georgia's schools, particularly the state's rural schools.

In the state's 181 school systems, 2493 schools serve over 1.8 million students, and currently over 62 percent of those students are non-white, 64 percent are classified as economically disadvantaged (ED), 13 percent have an identified disability, and 10 percent are English Language Learners (ELL). Further, nearly 71 percent of the state's schools are designated Title I schools with large concentrations of students from low-income families. One hundred twenty of the 181 school districts in Georgia are designated as rural districts, and of those 120, 100 are designated as high-needs rural districts (GaDOE, n.d.). Georgia's rural schools are some of the fastest growing in the state, and according to data from Statistical Atlas (n.d.), rural areas in Georgia have some of the lowest post-secondary enrollment rates in the state.

Past research is clear on the tremendous impact teachers have on student outcomes. Elementary and middle school teachers make up the largest bulk of

Georgia's workforce at nearly 140,000 statewide (Statistical Atlas, n.d.). Further, data revealed that Georgia's non-white residents were more likely to live in poverty and black and brown workers earned lower wages than their white counterparts in all measured occupations. Similarly, females earned lower wages than males in all measured occupations, and females at all age levels were more likely to live in poverty than males in the state. As the demographics of the state continue to shift, the student populations will most likely incur similar population growths; therefore, it is critical that Georgia's school leaders are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to lead for equity to help close these gaps.

Importance of Dispositions in Principal Leadership

Much of the work of educational leadership preparation programs is largely guided by national and state standards and accreditation requirements as well as state educational leadership certification requirements. The most prominent expectation of educational leadership preparation programs is to prepare its candidates for state educational leadership certification. Wilson et al. (2020) noted these practices include teaching, tracking, monitoring, and assessing candidate subject matter knowledge of educational leadership, including their understanding of the practicality of school leadership. The challenge for this preparation model is principals work in a social context interacting daily with teachers, parents, students, supervisors, and peers (Pannell et al., 2018). Thus, possessing knowledge and skills in the realm of educational leadership is not enough to ensure an effective leader.

Clifford et al. (2012) identified two means by which to evaluate school leader effectiveness: through the *impact* lens and through the *practice* lens. The *impact* view is measured by student outcome data, and the *practice* view is measured by those leadership abilities and behaviors that could be observed over time and in different settings and contexts. According to Wilson et al. (2020), leadership preparation program providers most know what strong, effective educational leadership looks and feels like, and when asked to describe an effective leader, often words such as trustworthy, honest, respectful, cooperative, and compassionate far outweigh the terms related to knowledge and skill. These values, beliefs, and commitments are often referred to as *dispositions*, and many argue possessing certain dispositional traits are just as important in leadership success as possessing the content knowledge and practical skills taught in principal preparation programs (Allen et al., 2017). Schulte and Kowal (2005) contended that possession and demonstration of the proper professional dispositions can ultimately be a central determining factor in a school leader's success, where supporting teachers and staff to increase motivation is imperative

for improved performance (Kempa et al., 2017). A challenge for educational leadership programs remains how to define and develop dispositions of effective school leaders as well as seamlessly integrate dispositional training into their programmatic framework (Allen et al., 2017; Wilson et al., 2020).

Common challenges for educational leadership preparation programs are the multiple and varying definitions of *dispositions* and the lack of a consensus to which dispositions are to be assessed by the program. *Disposition* has been defined as not only the personal qualities or characteristics an individual possesses (Taylor & Wasicsko, 2000) but also the behaviors and tendencies of a person's actions based on those beliefs and commitments (Allen et al., 2017; Borko et al., 2007). Further, Wilson et al. (2020) suggested that dispositions could be predictive of future patterns of leadership behavior. Recognizing the central importance of human relationships on leadership work and the research that characterizes specific traits and dispositions that attribute to school leaders' success, national and state organizations have begun to revise standards and practices to include dispositions in leadership training and effectiveness. For instance, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) developed the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL), a revision of the existing set of educational leadership standards that extended beyond knowledge and skills to dispositional aspects of leadership (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2018). Taking it a step further, the GaPSC, in partnership with Clark Atlanta University, defined *disposition* as consistently demonstrated professional behaviors guided by moral and ethical commitments to values and beliefs and although much concern has been expressed about the feasibility of measuring such a construct, begun to develop an instrument to assess interpersonal dispositions that support the collaborative nature of work required for achieving success in schools (Hooper, 2019).

Methodology

A qualitative, phenomenological investigative approach was used to understand the lived experiences and perceptions of leadership preparedness of school principals in southeastern Georgia to better understand how their higher education degree programs prepared them for their work as a school leader. The primary research question was: What are rural school principals' lived experiences of effective leadership preparation? The two secondary research questions were: (1) What are rural principals' perceptions of their educational leadership preparation, including influential program factors?; and (2) How can researchers and practitioners collaborate to improve principal preparation?

Participants and Procedures

Participants were five school principals, in accordance with the national study's protocol requiring a focus group with five and eight participants. Initially there were six participants, however, one dropped out prior to the focus group. Participants were four males and one female who were currently serving as school principals in their districts. The years of experience as school leaders ranged from three to 15, with a mean of 32 years of experience. Four participants identified as Euro-American and one as African-American. Participants were assigned pseudonyms and represented five different rural school districts in southeastern Georgia (Table 1). Prior to engaging in the study, participants were informed that this study was part of a national study using focus groups as the means for data collection to better understand principal preparation.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Name	Gender	Race	Years of Leadership Experience	Current Leadership Role
Richard	Male	Euro-American	15	Elementary Principal
Caroline	Female	Euro-American	3	Elementary Principal
Samuel	Male	Euro-American	3	Middle Principal
David	Male	Euro-American	3	Middle Principal
Michael	Male	African-American	8	Secondary Principal

Before collecting data, permission was obtained from the university's Institutional Review Board. This study was part of a larger national study endorsed by the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA), a consortium of higher education institutions committed to advancing the preparation and practice of educational leaders for the benefit of schools and children, on preparedness of school leaders in their education programs. Convenience sampling was utilized to recruit participants. Names of the potential subjects were obtained from the state-maintained database of public-school principals for Georgia. Prior to the start of the focus group, participants were

provided a verbal and written informed consent that delineated the purpose of the study, participation criteria, significance of the study, potential psychological risks, and confidentiality. They received the option to withdraw from the study at any point and were informed that the interviews would be recorded and transcribed.

Data Collection

Demographic information for each participant was gathered prior to beginning the semi-structured focus group interview. The audio-recorded focus group was conducted in an in-person format and concluded within two hours. As this study was part of a larger national study, the use of focus groups for data collection had previously been determined. Focus groups allow participants to directly answer interview questions, as well as organically discuss responses with fellow participants being interviewed (Khuwaja et al., 2019). An interview protocol ensured consistency for the entire data collection process, and involved the primary researcher facilitating the interview and two secondary researchers taking observational notes about participants and the discussion. After answering an initial introductory question about who they are, their current school leadership position, and school district, participants were asked 11 questions designed to grasp the essence of their experiences with regard to three overarching categories: a) educational leadership program preparation, b) leadership preparation and diversity competency, and c) ways educational leadership programs can improve their preparation of school leaders.

Data Analysis Procedures

The focus group recording was transcribed and analyzed using Husserl's descriptive approach to phenomenological inquiry and analysis (Gill, 2014). Husserl's primary objective was to understand the essence of individual experiences which requires researchers to bracket their biases on the topic of inquiry (Gill, 2014). The primary researcher followed Husserl's four levels of analysis: first identifying the phenomenon experienced by each participant; second noting common themes across participant cases; third considering the individual themes; and fourth how they culminate in overarching themes that speak to the majority of participants' experiences. (Gill, 2014). During the process the primary researcher read the focus group transcript multiple times, coding specific words and phrases that developed into themes. Thematic development was shared with an external peer auditor trained in qualitative phenomenological inquiry and analysis, and the themes did not change as a result of consultation. Two research meetings were held to discuss thematic development and rationale

with all researchers that led to the identification of four overarching themes with sub-themes.

Qualitative research requires data to be triangulated to address potential issues with trustworthiness. Three methods were used: external auditor, peer review, and keeping an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The primary researcher kept an audit trail that included field notes, transcripts, thematic rationale, and the summary of finding. A qualitative researcher trained in phenomenology served as the external auditor. The external auditor had access to the audit trail, researcher journal, original interview transcripts, coded transcripts, and rationale for identifying emergent themes. The external auditor and primary researcher regularly conversed about the data collection and analysis process. Peer review occurred during two post-focus group research meetings when the primary researcher presented initial data analysis and rationale for thematic development. All researchers discussed their interpretations of the overarching and sub-themes before finalizing the results.

Findings

The following overarching themes and sub-themes emerged from the data analysis and were used to answer the primary and two secondary research questions (Table 2). The four overarching themes were *productive/favorable leadership preparation program culture, bridging theory and practice in educational leadership preparation program*, *multicultural competencies for practice*, and *recommendations for principal preparation programs*.

Table 2

Overarching Themes

Overarching Themes	Sub-themes
Productive/favorable leadership preparation program culture	Classroom experience Faculty influence Curriculum design

Bridging theory and practice in educational leadership preparation program	Experiential learning Discussion of real-life scenarios
Multicultural competencies for practice	How school leaders address and cope with current diversity trends nation and district-wide Meeting student needs
Recommendations for programs	Increasing experiential learning opportunities Increasing curriculum on day-to-day tasks of leaders Connecting course activities/assignments to real-life examples

Theme 1: Productive/Favorable Leadership Preparation Program Culture

The overarching theme of *productive/favorable leadership preparation program culture* resulted from the interpretation of the data generated by the first secondary research question used to explore how rural principals perceived their educational leadership preparation, including influential program factors. This theme was significant for all participants, specifically the factors that impacted student learning and development. Sub-themes included classroom experience, faculty influence, and curriculum design.

All participants were impacted by the type of classroom experiences they had, including the cohort model and in-class discussions. All participants were members of cohort models in their preparation programs; three participants discussed the population of students with whom they were in classes, specifically if they were mixed in classes with students from the higher education side of educational leadership programs. Samuel, speaking about his dislike of mixed classes, stated:

> I feel like the P-12 people...wanna be in the program and grow in the knowledge base...the higher ed people...are pushed into the program...as a part of their job…and have a different perspective than...P-12 folks.

Conversely, Richard appreciated differing viewpoints of the higher education students versus the P-12 students on controversial issues, "It was interesting because…[the Higher Education student] group would think of it one way, and [the P-12 student] group would think of something."

In regard to classroom discussions as vital to their growth as school leaders, Richard spoke to the impact of real-world discussions taking place in the classroom that allowed him to process his reactions and potential plans of actions prior to becoming a school leader:

> Looking at current events...discussing it, learning from each other are some of the best things I remember. I don't remember too many of the books I read...I remember the discussions more than anything else.

All participants addressed the influence of faculty on their development, specifically professors who had experience in the field and were enthusiastic about the work of school leaders. Participants Richard, David, and Michael spoke in-depth about teachers who connected course content to real-life experiences made those classes impactful to their development. David shared, "I did some of my best work for [name of professor]'s class just because he was so enthusiastic...I didn't always get that enthusiasm with everybody." Richard spoke to faculty members' energy about the course topics coupled with their experiences working in the field:

> Some were energetic...Those are the ones you remember because the intent was, 'let's learn from each other,' and then take it in the context of what you've already done in the program…those that had lived in our shoes...were the ones that experienced that.

David added, "What made that stand out was the enthusiasm and the practical experience that [professor name] was able to bring, versus, you know, theory, and...sometimes lack of enthusiasm." Faculty experiences as school leaders and connecting it with curriculum design was significant for participants, especially Michael:

> The scenarios were really helpful because each of the instructors and professors were practicing, so they had a wealth of knowledge...my better teachers were the ones that had lived in our shoes.

Three participants emphasized the importance and influence of curriculum design on their school leader development and current practices. David described classroom discussions about readings. He noted that just reading without discussion was not helpful, and he expressed desire for more purposeful explanations of assignments and class activities in order for it to be more meaningful, "It gets old when everybody gets an A...I don't have a problem with everybody getting an A, if you work for it, and you get something out of it….there was no why...Why am I doing this?" Michael added, "Some readings could have been more specific…a middle school's different than a high school." The desire for in-depth classroom conversations about leadership and real-life

application of readings was further echoed by Richard, "You do that in collaborative leadership...make sure everybody's voice is heard...Those are the [classes] that I remember the most...you learn a lot more on the job."

Participants discussed the need for meaningful classroom discourse related to course curriculum design, specifically readings and activities assigned by professors. Samuel shared:

> The projects or assignments or books I found were immediately applicable to my current role was...create a change project for something that is a need at your school...something that I was able to read the book and then immediately begin implementation at my school.

Michael was impacted by aspects of the curriculum focused on real-life application of the role of school leaders stating, "It was powerful to be able to integrate things that we've read about, but then recognizing that reading may have provided a foundation."

Theme 2: Bridging Theory and Practice in Educational Leadership Preparation Program

The overarching theme of *bridging theory and practice in educational leadership preparation program* resulted from the interpretation of the data generated by the first secondary research question used to explore how rural principals perceived their educational leadership preparation, including influential program factors. Sub-themes included experiential learning and discussion of real-life scenarios.

Experiential learning activities such as shadowing or meeting with current professionals was a significant theme for all five participants. Caroline discussed the impact of this:

> We would have a chance to speak to sitting principals about what their day looked like...we'd do facility tours...at the time, I was like, 'Well, why do you need to know that?' But...it kinda all makes sense...you need that working understanding of all those different pieces...that was something that I really did like.

Richard added:

> We did some facility tours...I would like to have done more. It could've helped in the job that I'm in now...I remember one superintendent talking in a bunch of my classes...and it was neat to see...I can learn from that.

David described his appreciation for these types of experiential learning opportunities and expressed his desire to have more of them, "I wish we would've had more scenarios and organic conversations…with leaders."

All participants identified the need for increased conversations with faculty and active school leaders about real-life activities. While they recognized the need to discuss leading instruction in school settings, the culminating factor was the need for more didactic discussion about daily events in a school setting for administrators. Michael identified a clear omission from program curriculum was not addressing that leading instruction is not one of the first thing a school leader starts the day. Participants identified the areas of working with clerical and custodial staff, engaging with students and parents, budgeting, hiring, firing, and daily tasks as vital discussion items for preparation programs to include in their delivery. Participants Richard, Caroline, and Michael acknowledged the important roles of clerical and custodial staff. Michael shared, "You have clerical vacancies...that isn't really emphasized...Because your classified staff, they are packing your parachutes." Richard continued, "We know who runs the school...we don't run the school." Caroline contributed, "[The clerical staff] can make you or break you." Speaking about integral school staff members, Michael noted, "If you don't have good custodians...- or if your cafeteria staff can't come to work...If your clerical people don't have good customer service, you're gonna be dealing with putting out those fires...more so than leading instruction." Caroline addressed the importance of school leaders learning how to connect with students, parents, and staff, "You build those relationships with kids. You build those relationships with parents and staff. You know you're gonna have people on your side. You're gonna be able to get things done." Richard and Samuel emphasized the need for learning how to budget in their preparation programs. Samuel stated:

> You cannot be prepared for the amount of money that comes in and out of a building, how to spend that money, the stipulations…different areas of money…how funding relays into staffing...what decisions can you make…based on your school's structure and population and the needs of your SPED kids.

Caroline described tasks she wished she learned more about, such as difficult conversations with students, faculty, parents, or staff:

> When I first worked as an [associate principal] in middle school, [the principal] said to me, 'First thing in the morning, if you've got a difficult conversation, have that conversation [early] because if you don't...it will eat at you—you won't be productive.

She continued, "You can have a staff member that's knocking it out of the park, but there's something that's just not going quite well...and then you have to pull them in and sit them down—that's tough."

Theme 3: Multicultural Competencies for Practice

The overarching theme of *multicultural competencies for practice* resulted from the interpretation of the first secondary research question used to explore how rural principals perceived their educational leadership preparation, including influential program factors. Sub-themes included how school leaders learn to address and cope with current diversity trends with district (and national) demographics and how to meet students' basic needs before addressing curriculum. All participants discussed the importance of being educated on diversity issues and school district student demographics. Michael valued the education he had on diverse student populations and needs, stating:

> It raised awareness to subgroups you may not have realized were in your building…a light bulb moment...raising awareness to understand that communities are changing, the impact on schools, and how administrators and teachers have to be willing to address that…for me, it was powerful.

David acknowledged the lack of diversity in his program cohort and the effect on his preparation, "In the EDD program, it's just a roomful of middle-class white people…no diversity in the group…no rich discussion, like, 'Hey, what's your point of view? Oh, it's the same as mine. Great.' He discussed the lack of program preparation for diversity issues:

> I don't remember that as part of my program. We read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*…I think we missed the mark, perhaps...We had to come up with a creative way to present the book...when you have a bunch of people that just bitch about reading the book…you don't get as much out of it.

Richard discussed the importance of diversity education in training programs as it weighs heavier than curriculum design, "How about some of the mass load, meeting somebody's needs before - before you teach somebody?....You know, I gotta feed them and make 'em warm before they'll learn stuff."

Theme 4: Recommendations for Principal Preparation Programs

The overarching theme of *recommendations* resulted from the first and second secondary research questions that explored how rural principals perceived their educational leadership preparation, including influential program factors, and how practitioners can collaborate to produce research that is accessible and

valuable to school leaders. All participants voiced recommendations, with some focusing on specific classroom activities, and others identifying experiential learning opportunities to incorporate. Sub-themes included increasing experiential learning opportunities, increasing curriculum on day-to-day tasks of leaders, and connecting course activities/assignments to real-life examples.

Regarding experiential learning opportunities, Michael recommended more shadowing experiences or brining current school leaders into classrooms for discussion with students, "If there was one thing that could be embedded…have a meal every year with the local districts and…bringing practicing administrators in that align with what you're doing and tapping into their perspectives." Richard added, "That 'me too,' that sense of, you know...come live the life of a principal for one day." Samuel spoke about increased curriculum on day-to-day tasks of leaders, "The relationship piece is the most important factor as an administrator in your building...relationships with the students and relationships, teachers, classified staff, parents and district office staff."

Samuel, Richard, and Michael emphasized the importance of connecting course activities and assignments to real-life examples. Samuel described his preference for more of these conversions and activities in his program, "If I make this decision…how are all of these people going to be affected?...not only how am I gonna affect them, but how are they are gonna perceive that decision?" Richard added, "That would be beneficial…we talked about some of the other things…conversations, budget...scheduling."

Overall, the four overarching themes generated from participant responses answered the primary research question exploring the lived experiences of rural school principals. Overarching themes one through three addressed the first secondary research question, and the fourth overarching theme addressed the both secondary research questions. Participants contributed valuable recommendations that are further addressed in the discussion of the findings.

Discussion

Four overarching themes were established including productive and favorable leadership preparation program culture, bridging theory and practice in educational leadership preparation program, multicultural competencies for practice, and recommendations for principal preparation programs. Information presented by the participants regarding these identified themes attended to the primary and two secondary research questions addressed in this study. Participants noted that their preparation was influenced by their classroom

experiences, the composition of the students within classes, and the breath of their group-based discussions that applied to real-life scenarios. As noted by the participants, imperative areas of focus for these real-life, scenario-based discussions in principal preparation programs should include working with clerical and custodial staff, engaging with students and parents, budgeting, hiring, firing, and conducting daily managerial and instructional tasks (McBrayer et al., 2018b). Participants further addressed the benefits of faculty members holding prior experience in field-based work, leading to sparked interest and eagerness to listen and learn from these individuals' experiences. Additionally, participants highlighted the importance of curriculum focused on real-life application of the role of school leaders, including opportunities for direct observation of and conversations with professionals in the field.

In review, two participants, discussed the need for increased engagement and opportunities for current principals and school leaders to communicate with students in educational leadership programs to build more collaborative and shadowing experiences. Participants acknowledged the value in spending time with current school leaders when they were students in their educational leadership programs. Specifically, experiential learning activities such as shadowing professionals was instrumental to their learning and development as school leaders in training. Engaging in conversations about diverse student bodies and their specific needs was of high importance to participants, especially as they work in rural school districts with unique student population characteristics and needs. Thus, an increased program focus on multicultural competencies of school leaders is vital to their job performance.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Due to the participant sample only including five school principals, it is recommended that future research be conducted to gather more participants across the nation to develop a more comprehensive understand the balance of both managerial and instructional practices (McBrayer et al., 2018b) with a focus on school leaders' dispositions (Hooper, 2019). and competencies in various areas. The researchers further recommend that principal preparation programs work with school districts to provide aspiring principals with purposeful, collaborative, and sustainable professional development to most effectively prepare competent school leaders (McBrayer et al., 2018a). Additionally, it is recommended that these same focus groups be replicated with higher education graduates and current faculty to develop an understanding of how to improve competencies and dispositions in university classrooms and in partnership with school districts to develop well-informed, knowledgeable and noteworthy future leaders in society.

Conclusion and Implications for Practice

Overall, the results from the fourth theme, *recommendations for principal preparation programs*, significantly illuminate several implications for principal preparation programs. Recruiting current school leaders to discuss their lived experiences was a powerful component of the researchers better understanding the training received in their principal preparation programs in effort to inform practice. Consistent with former students, participants reported feeling unprepared for their leadership roles, and desired stronger real-life learning examples and activities in their training programs (Pannell et al., 2015; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). To assist with the leadership gap (Pannell & McBrayer, 2020). Faculty could create a panel of leaders to discuss their experiences or include specific experiential learning assignments for which students have the opportunity to shadow school leaders and observe their lived experiences. Faculty in educational leadership programs may also increase the instructional day-to-day tasks of leaders, by balancing the seemingly mundane managerial tasks with those instructional tasks vital to school improvement (McBrayer et al., 2018b). Daily classroom activities are encouraged to include comprehensive discussions on potential problems related to these day-to-day instructional and managerial tasks to facilitate increased understanding of the issues and problem-solving strategies to combat challenges as they arise. Additionally, increasing multicultural education and diversity-awareness training is imperative to school leader growth and development. The lived experiences of principals is a sound mode in better understanding the experiences aspiring principals endure during their preparation programs in an effort to improve principal preparation training. If principal preparation programs continue to fail to training school leaders to be competent in the field, we are in turn failing our students. Thus, university principal preparation programs must partner with school districts to provide the purposeful, collaborative, and sustainable professional learning needed to continue with a pipeline of high-quality school leaders effectively prepared to lead in our 21st century schools.

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