

USING CASE METHOD TO ADDRESS EQUITY-RELATED GAPS IN PRINCIPAL ASPIRANTS' LEARNING EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRACT

Case method as an andragogical approach connects theory and practice in numerous fields: law, medicine, business, and education. With the recent COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns faced by public schools, higher education institutions faced challenges in how to address learning that had previously occurred within field experiences. The authors, working in the field of educator preparation, were able to shift some learning from field experiences to case method. With this shift, they were able to purposefully address issues of equity that students inconsistently encountered through field experiences. This self-study focuses on the implementation of a case study that had been previously published in a peer-reviewed journal by the authors. This case study became part of the culminating assessment for a course in the principal preparation program. Student responses indicated that case method instruction offered an opportunity to consider decisions involving equity in a low stake environment.

INTRODUCTION

Principal preparation programs face the daunting task of providing the scholarship and depth of knowledge aspiring leaders will need as they are called on to expertly shape and control daily events in people's lives. Lipsky (2010) writes that a street-level bureaucrat such as a school principal makes countless decisions each day. Preparing principal aspirants for making the countless decisions that affect both students and adults calls for experiences that convey authenticity (Orr et al., 2012), connect theory to practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007), and reflect the real work of school principals (Davis, 2016). Principal preparation programs often use field experiences to address these goals. Field experiences allow principal aspirants to apply theory to practice in high-stakes settings, but they also provide principal aspirants with inconsistent access to equity-related issues in their school context. The COVID-19 pandemic brought a greater sense of urgency to our previous pursuit of authentic, problem-solving work that addressed specific knowledge and skills needed in leading schools for equitable outcomes.

We were novice users and writers of the case method when the COVID-19 related lockdowns started in March 2020. As we worked to shift instruction from face-to-face and field experiences, case studies emerged as providing an andragogical approach that encouraged collaborative learning, developed principal aspirants' critical thinking around complex problems of practice, and provided opportunities for reflection. As COVID-19 posed a new set of challenges in providing principal aspirants with access to experiences spanning the required standards, we quickly revised our course plans and expanded our use of case method. The goal of this project was to better understand how principal aspirants write about equity issues that arise within a case study.

CURRENT LITERATURE ON PREPARING SCHOOL LEADERS

In considering equity-centered leaders over the last 20 years of research, Grissom, and colleagues (2021) identified direct-impact behaviors and indirect-impact behaviors affecting groups of students, particularly students from underrepresented groups. They identified principal management of student disciplinary actions as a direct-impact behavior. Indirect-impact behaviors included the following: the principal working with teachers to implement culturally responsive teaching practices and using hiring practices resulting in more teachers of color. Grissom and colleagues also identified behaviors that should be included in principal preparation programs: engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers, building strong relationships and collaborative cultures, strategically managing personnel, and prioritizing the needs of the most vulnerable groups of students. The case study in this work focused specifically on the first practice, engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers.

Effective school leaders make a difference for those students whom they serve. Research from the last 20 years has consistently demonstrated their impact. In a review of existing research, Leithwood et al. (2004) found principals were second only to teachers in effect on student achievement, but perhaps more importantly, their impact was greatest for those students who needed it most. More recently, Manna (2015) referred to the potential of principals to act as “powerful multipliers of effective teaching and leadership practices in schools. And those practices can contribute much to the success of the nation’s students” (p. 7). The Wallace Foundation’s most recent report (Grissom et al., 2021) reviewed research from the last 20 years and found consistent evidence of principals’ effects on student achievement. In a synthesis of six studies involving 22,000 principals, Grissom and colleagues found the impact of effective school principals to be “nearly as large as the effect of having a similarly effective teacher. Principals’ effects, however, are larger in scope because they are averaged over all students in a school, rather than a classroom” (p. 14).

Despite the importance of effective principals and their potential to impact student achievement, 80% of superintendents surveyed believed improvement of principal preparation was needed. District leaders also expressed their dissatisfaction with programs not reflecting the real work of the principal (Davis, 2016). The call for authenticity in the program of study for leadership preparation was not new to this study. Stephen Davis and colleagues (2005) described the disconnect between university principal preparation programs and the real world of educational leadership. Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2007) concluded there was room for programs to improve their integration of theory and practice. Sanzo and colleagues (2011) found a university-district partnership benefited a principal preparation program by increasing the authenticity of the program. District leaders were able to provide input that led to assignments more realistically reflecting the job of the principal.

Leadership programs should provide opportunities for principal aspirants to connect theory to practice. Field experiences are often used to provide authentic learning experiences informed by local needs and context. Further, these experiences allow programs to engage district or school-level professionals in the work for this purpose (Johnson & James, 2018). Cosner and colleagues (2018) recognized the value in combining field-based experiences with large-group pedagogy to consider individual learning experiences and school context to further develop leadership practices. Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) also recognized the value of problem-based learning and included “case methods, action research, and projects, that link theory and practice and support reflection” (p. 63) as examples.

The University Council of Educational Administration (Orr et al., 2012) published a framework for learning experiences principal preparation that emphasized the importance of authentic learning.

Their framework included the following principles:

- Authentic, meaningful, relevant problem-finding linking theory and principal practice.
- Involves sense-making around critical problems of practice.
- Explores, critiques, deconstructs from equity perspective (race, culture, language).
- Requires collaboration and interdependence.
- Develops confidence in leadership.
- Places both the professor and student in a learning situation.
- Learners are empowered and responsible for own learning.
- Shifts perspective from classroom to school, district, or state level.
- Has a reflective component (Orr et al., 2012, p. 14)?

These principles guided program faculty thinking in developing learning experiences for principal aspirants with many evident in the application of the case method.

When developing what UCEA identified as powerful learning experiences, principal preparation programs often focus primarily on field experiences. For principal aspirants, the learning that comes from completing required field experiences draws on the situational, environmental, and social contexts of learning (Lave, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991). The physical and social context, the activity, and the learning are all integral to the experience (Putnam & Borko, 2000). Principal aspirants may participate in the same learning experiences, but their context cannot be separated from their learning. Therefore, field experiences do not always provide the desired learning opportunities, especially related to issues of equity. Clayton and colleagues (2017) recognized possible challenges related to learning through field experiences: the relationship between the mentor and the intern, a lack of site-based interactions with the mentor, a lack of knowledge of leadership standards by the site-based mentor and competing demands for the mentor's time. These demands were not universal but instead revealed inconsistencies in student learning experiences in the field. A final challenge is that different situations can give rise to different learning opportunities (Putnam & Borko, 2000), so while some principal aspirants may confront issues of equity within an assigned learning activity, other principal aspirants in different contexts may have an entirely different experience.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We situated this work in three theories. The first is the possibility for case method to serve as an andragogical method for integrating theory with practice in preparing educators to serve in the role of principal. The second is the desired development of equity-centered decision-making skills in principal aspirants. For this work, bounded rationality theory seemed to best reflect expectations for principal aspirants. Finally, the National Equity Project's Equity Stance provided a mechanism for evaluating equity thinking in student work.

Case Method

The use of case studies in professional learning originated in the school of law at Harvard in 1870. Other disciplines such as medicine and business have since adopted the case method as a part of preparing professionals in their ranks. Rasinski (1989), Merseth (1991), Shulman (1992), and Sykes and Bird (1992) have been calling for the use of case method teaching in teacher education for decades. Case method instruction has had a significant role in school leadership preparation programs as well (Taylor, 2009, as cited in Vennebo & Aas, 2021).

Fossey and Crow (2011), identifying the necessary components of a good case as context, complexity, ambiguity, and relevance, believe case method instruction provides for a more interesting, student-centered pedagogy than do lectures and other readings. Complexity and ambiguity in case studies allow principal aspirants, as they encounter numerous explicit and implicit problems from multiple perspectives, to practice and come to accept the role both complexity and ambiguity will play in their administrative futures.

We sought to address complexity in our published case through diverse characters that encouraged principal aspirants to consider multiple perspectives. We also created multiple levels and layers of problems. Principal aspirants were asked to provide multiple options for the principal and to consider the possible repercussions of each option. No options were without possible repercussions as is often the case of leadership. Providing problems of practice that offered multiple and distinct paths to a solution and encouraging principal aspirants to critique possible solutions from multiple perspectives supported the ambiguity of the case.

Priniski and colleagues (2018) write of making learning personally meaningful by making it relevant. The use of case studies allows instructors to provide insight into relevant topics as needed. With the topic of equity being extremely relevant in our schools and communities, we created characters in our case that represented diverse perspectives across race and gender. The artifacts that were part of the case included implicit evidence of equity issues related to gender, race, language, and disability. The scripted observation addressed how the teacher responded to different groups of students, particularly the “disregarding” of Black male students in the classroom. Not only did the teacher appear to give Black male students “permission to fail” (Ladson-Billings, 2002), she did not use strategies designed to engage students or even reading selections that represented multiple perspectives.

Bounded Rationality Theory

Bounded rationality theory functioned as one aspect of our theoretical framework. Originating in the 1978 Nobel Prize in Economics award-winning work of Simon, bounded rationality theory maintains that in settings where decision-makers are “...unable to perfectly process the vast amount of relevant information...” made available to them, those decision-making leaders must instead “... seek outcomes that are simply good enough rather than optimal” (Mallard, 2020, p. 2). The onus of making the optimal, perfect, or right choice might be an impossible burden. Cognitive limitations, imperfect information, and time constraints result in “satisficing” (p. 17) in which a satisfactory, but not necessarily optimal, choice is made. The notion that there is not a simple right choice aligns with literature on using case method in leadership preparation. Vennebo and Aas (2021) wrote that challenging principal aspirants’ current thinking involves “a process of ongoing reflection and discussion” (p. 2) and a recognition that there may not always be a right answer.

Simon (1997) also described the importance of substantive and procedural rationality that examines not only the choice made but also the importance of the process. The process includes identifying options, evaluating their consequences, forecasting the future based on knowledge and theories, and choosing the most satisfactory option. The decision-making process described by Simon was reflected in the design of this case study where principal aspirants were asked to apply theory and knowledge to (1) understand the situation; (2) identify problems of practice; (3) generate possible options; (4) evaluate the consequences of those options; (5) choose the most satisfying option; and (6) create a plan of action. Bounded rationality theory also aligns with our providing them what we considered to be important information and ignoring other information about the case. Everything is not made known to the aspirants.

The Equity Leadership Stance

In providing an equity lens through which principal aspirants might engage in decision-making, we first needed to define this lens and desired types of behaviors for ourselves. We found the National Equity Partnership's materials valuable. Particularly, the Equity Leadership Stance using the see-engage-act framework where seeing leads to engaging which leads to acting aligned to the behaviors, we sought to promote in principal aspirants. The Equity Leadership Stance defined these stages as:

- Seeing the territory, we are navigating (the window) and ourselves (the mirror).
- Engaging others to make meaning and define relational containers for complex work; and
- Acting by defining approaches to learn more about and address the equity challenge.

These stages guided the development of the following stated research questions.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this article is to share initial findings related to the use of case method for low-stake learning. The case used was a previously peer-reviewed and published case (Leggett & Smith, 2019) that provided principal aspirants the opportunity to situate themselves in the role of the principal in addressing deficit thinking in a veteran teacher. We reviewed principal aspirants' responses to address the following research questions:

- How did principal aspirants see issues concerning equity when responding to a written case study?
- How did principal aspirants engage with issues concerning equity when responding to a written case study?
- How did principal aspirants compose their action plans to address issues concerning equity when responding to a written case study?

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The context involved in case method andragogy is multilayered. The first layer of context described is the literal context of this work. This study took place within the principal preparation program at Western Kentucky University (WKU). WKU is a regional university in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Our principal aspirants in the principal preparation program are mostly teachers and instructional

leaders within their school context. School context varies greatly with many principal aspirants coming from small rural districts with very little racial or ethnic diversity but some principal aspirants coming from large urban districts that are very much racially and ethnically diverse. The case study that was the subject of this study was used during principal aspirants' third semester in the program as part of the course Developing Teacher Capacity.

The second layer of context involved the working context of the principal aspirants. The participants in this study in their most natural contexts were teachers, interventionists, or instructional coaches. In these daily roles, some may have hyperextended the apprenticeship of observation proposed by Lortie (1975) by situating the reality they perceived of the administrator's role in what they knew only from observing principals prior to and during their educational leadership classes. With so many of the decisions that principals make shrouded by personnel and student privacy protections, what participants saw and had seen, their apprenticeship of observation, provided only the tip of the iceberg, a tip that many times revealed the less complex decisions and actions in a school administrator's workday.

The third context in this study is created in the case method itself. Written by the two researchers and published in a peer-reviewed journal, the case method provides an opportunity for principal aspirants to consider issues of equity as reflected in the PSEL (Professional Standards for Educational Leaders). The writers of this case drew on their own experiences as K12 teachers and administrators as well as their current work with K12 schools to bring authenticity to the case. For those participants that serve in small rural schools with very little diversity, the authentic yet contrived provided case study created the opportunity for their growth in making equitable administrative decisions and also provided fairness for those participants themselves, making their learning as principal aspirants more equal to those principal aspirants that worked in schools where diversity was present and a part of the administration's daily culture.

METHODOLOGY

This project used self-study as the primary method. Self-study is a research approach emerging from action research that allows educators to focus on one's own practice (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015). As the goal of self-study is to understand one's own practice and make these practices visible to others, the method permits the collection and use of any relevant data. The faculty members collaboratively developed a narrative on the use of this case study in the principal preparation program. In doing so, they reviewed course artifacts, student responses, and other available data for evidence of equity-driven thinking and powerful learning experiences. Using characteristics of powerful learning experiences (Cunningham et al., 2019), the researchers sought to understand how principal aspirants found and made sense of problems of practice; linked theory and practice; explored, critiqued, and deconstructed from an equity perspective; shifted their perspective from student to practitioner; and reflected on lessons learned from the case.

Participants

Participants in this study were two associate professors at a regional, comprehensive university serving students in rural and urban contexts responsible for preparing educators to serve as both teachers and school administrators. One associate professor served as the instructor for the course while the other performed a member-checking role in the construction of the narrative of this self-study. The instructor of record emailed principal aspirants from three cohorts to request their

participation in the study. Eighteen individuals agreed to participate. These participants included eleven females and seven males with Master's degrees and at least three years of prior teaching experience.

Description of the Case

The case for this study was related to evaluating and coaching a veteran teacher characterized by deficit-thinking toward students. The principal was a first-year principal who had previously taught with the teacher in this school. Embedded in the case were additional challenges of leading a rural school. The principal, who was a new principal but had previously taught with the teacher in the case, now needed to provide research-based, culturally responsive, actionable feedback aligned to the principles of adult learning theory. The authors of the case had previously published the case narrative (Leggett & Smith, 2019), but the prompts and rubric used were not included in the published document. The published case included a narrative describing the context of the case: a meeting between the teacher and principal, a brief history of the principal's concerns about the teacher's relationships with students, and information about the community, particularly related to hiring challenges. A page from the teacher's grade book and scripted notes from the principal's observation of the teacher were provided. The teaching notes at the end of the case study offered a brief summary of relevant literature.

The rubric assessed principal aspirants as effective communicators, learning leaders, equity engineers, and innovative problem solvers. These roles aligned with the program's leadership framework. As innovative problem solvers, they were assessed both on their ability to identify problems and provide solutions. The rubric rated them across four levels.

The instructions provided to principal aspirants asked them to do the following:

- Read the case and make notes of any concerns.
- Identify the principal's options and the possible repercussions of each option.
- Provide evidence of teacher performance related to Domain 3. Instruction of the Danielson Framework for Teaching.
- Develop three to five questions they might want to ask this teacher to promote her self-reflection.
- Develop a plan for post-conferencing with the teacher.

Data Analysis

De-identified principal aspirant responses to the case study were reviewed by the researchers with a focus on the following questions:

- What perspectives did the principal aspirant consider?
- Did the principal aspirant respond as a teacher or take on the role of the administrator?
- Did the principal aspirant connect theory to practice?
- In identifying and critiquing solutions, did the principal aspirant (a) restate the three solutions provided in the case study notes, (b) restate and provide additional solutions, or (c) provide only solutions from their previous experiences?

- How did the principal aspirant describe actionable steps?
 - a) Did they write from a first-person perspective as the administrator or from a third-person perspective?
 - b) Did they explicate how they might open and end the meeting?
 - c) Did they consider how they might redirect the conversation as needed?
 - d) Did they acknowledge the challenge of tackling critical issues in a manner that might lead to growth?

FINDINGS

The case invited principal aspirants to participate in equity-centered thinking at each level of the equity framework: seeing, engaging, and acting (National Equity Project, n.d.) We found two windows: the context of the case and the learning experiences of the program. We challenged our principal aspirants to see themselves as new characters, as equity-centered decision-makers and leaders, rather than solely reflecting as though looking into a mirror. They engaged with the problem as they proposed and critiqued solutions. Finally, as if seated in the office of the leader, they explicated their plan to act by identifying the next steps.

This section summarizes the overall findings from 18 submitted responses to the case study where principal aspirants provided consent. They were from three different cohorts. Graduate students in principal preparation who participated in this study are referred to as principal aspirants. Students will refer to the high school students in the case. The findings of the study are presented by order of the participants' responses to the research questions as follows:

● **Research Question 1:**

How did principal aspirants see issues concerning equity when responding to a written case study?

Case method allowed principal aspirants to consider multiple perspectives.

The case was designed to encourage principal aspirants to take a panoramic view and situate themselves into multiple perspectives. The rubric for the assignment also defined expectations for considering multiple perspectives. Proficient and exemplary papers, the two highest ratings, were expected to, "Accurately and deeply [evaluate] multiple perspectives." The prompts embedded within the case asked principal aspirants to consider the situation from the principal's perspective, but principal aspirants wore multiple lenses, especially when prompted to consider the possible repercussions of available options. The perspectives considered by principal aspirants included those of the principal, the teacher, and the students. A few principal aspirants considered other teachers' perspectives and the parents' perspectives.

The narrative focused on the principal and teacher as characters in the case and provided an initial meeting where the teacher voiced a cry for help. A few aspirants demonstrated varying degrees of empathy with the teacher citing "her lack of efficacy," and her "struggle to control emotions." While they expressed some sympathy for the teacher, they also acknowledged that her looming retirement and willingness to solely blame students meant improvement did not seem likely. One principal aspirant described this as the teacher's placing the blame for "student grades onto students without evaluating how her own practices may be inhibiting student learning in her classroom."

Aspirants also wrote from the principal's perspective. One described the incompatible "core philosophies" of the principal and the teacher. Another recognized the principal's desire to "develop more student-centered and culturally responsive practices." This aspirant also recognized the motivational challenges in supervising teachers, "the school leader cannot force someone into action—he or she can only control the circumstances which influence [the teacher's] actions." Several students acknowledged the time-consuming process of removing a tenured teacher with one specifying that "the principal is looking at a multi-year process." Once the principal successfully removes the teacher, some students acknowledged the "difficulty in finding teachers," referencing the particular challenges of staffing in rural schools.

Aspirants empathized with the students more than the teacher. They recognized students' perspectives of the teacher describing the "harsh tone" of the teacher, the failure of the teacher to "make connections" and "recognize students as people first," and concerns that "students may not see the teacher as a supportive person." Similar comments were made by principal aspirants related to the teacher's efforts to build relationships with parents including, "parents are not supported," "only negative parent contact," and "no effort...to build positive relationships." The girls' basketball coach confronts the teacher in the case study, and a few participants described the coach as "concerned about [the teacher's] [in]ability to reach black students."

Case method allowed principal aspirants to shift their perspectives.

One of the instructor's goals was shifting aspirants' perspectives from that of a classroom teacher to that of an administrator. This aligns with the UCEA's characteristic of powerful learning experiences, "Shifts perspective from classroom to school, district, or state level" (Orr et al., 2012, p. 14). Principal aspirants were asked by the prompts to, "develop a plan for post-conferencing with her [the teacher] that might best promote reflective practice and improvement in instruction."

In writing their plans to address how they would follow up with this teacher, principal aspirants used language that reflected how they saw themselves as leaders. For example, principal aspirants used the following language in writing their plans for post-conferencing with the teacher:

- "I would begin the conference by...."
- "I could then begin to steer the conversation...."
- "I may challenge the teacher...."
- "Here I can address the list of growth areas...."
- "I might then suggest that we collaborate on an action plan to address the goal."

Although they were not asked to write as if they were the principal, all principal aspirants wrote at least part of their plans in the first person. Most wrote their entire plan as if they were the principal. A few switched between first person and second person using the name of the principal in the case and the pronoun "she."

Case method allowed principal aspirants to connect the problems of practice to theory/learning.

As previously described, one of the challenges of university principal preparation programs is bridging the gaps between theory and practice. The prompt required principal aspirants to address

the following program learning: leading and promoting culturally responsive schools, aligning evidence from observations to the Kentucky Framework for Teaching, and providing feedback to adult learners.

- Leadership behaviors promoting culturally responsive schools: The literature review in the teaching notes at the end of the case provided options from the research on how principals might respond to teachers demonstrating deficit-thinking (Leggett & Smith, 2019).
- The Kentucky Framework for Teaching, particularly Domain 3. Instruction: The case study prompts included a table of indicators from the Kentucky Framework for Teaching (Danielson, 2014).
- Approaches to and question stems for providing feedback to adults based on ways of knowing (Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2016): The case study prompts students to incorporate strategies from this work.

An artifact in the case study was an excerpt from the teacher’s grade book which was designed to provoke questions and concerns. As a result, all aspirants surfaced concerns related to Domain 3d - Using Assessment in Instruction with statements such as “The first concern I noticed was the distribution of grades” and “The number of zeros in her grade book is alarming. As the administrator, I would want to know why students received so many zeros.” Other students provided questions for [the teacher] related to her assessment of student learning,

- “How do you assess student learning?”
- “How do you arrive at a specific grade for formative assessments?”
- “Do you notice any patterns in your grade book?”

All aspirants provided evidence of Danielson’s Domain 3 indicators. The indicators were provided in a table for students to complete. Students also provided connections to other domains. For example, in connecting to the Kentucky Framework for Teaching (Danielson, 2014), one student described the teacher’s failure to demonstrate knowledge of students as:

The patternistic manifestation of poor performance for students of certain characterizing demographics - students of color, male students, and students with IEPs or ELL - indicates a deficiency with regard to Domain 1B - Demonstrating Knowledge of Students. This domain prioritizes not only a teacher’s ability to deliver content but to deliver content in a way that is meaningful for the specific students in a particular classroom.

Aspiring principals also identified how the teacher’s way of knowing might influence how they provided feedback to the teacher, “I believe this teacher identifies with a socializing way of knowing. She is concerned with her status and how [her] reputation has changed.” Another student saw the teacher with an instrumental way of knowing.

The instrumental way of knowing best fits [the teacher] because she orients closely to rules, follows those rules to complete goals and objectives, and expects others to follow the rules as well. It was apparent by some of the comments she made...that she has a strong sense of right and wrong and that there is a clear right and wrong way to handle situations, solve problems, think, and behave...Based on her interactions with students, her difficulty building relationships, and lack of

providing a variety of materials from different historical viewpoints, Ms. Darcy has difficulty understanding others' perspectives, which is also a characteristic of instrumental knowers. As a result, my plan for a post-conference would include very tangible and action-oriented steps with models and guidelines to help support her growth.

Principal aspirants were also able to integrate other learning from the course and program. In identifying practices and offering suggestions to improve instruction, many principal aspirants used strategies from Marzano's (2017) *The New Art and Science of Teaching*. Other principal aspirants made specific connections to ideas related to culturally responsive teaching from readings in other courses and previous professional learning opportunities. Some principal aspirants connected to learning in other courses on topics such as assessment, leader dispositions, trust, and instructional rounds.

● **Research Question 2:**

How did principal aspirants engage with issues concerning equity when responding to a written case study?

Case method allowed principal aspirants to engage in problem-solving by identifying and critiquing solutions.

In identifying and critiquing solutions, most principal aspirants used the language of the three options provided in the case method notes (Leggett & Smith, 2019) and provided multiple possible positive and negative outcomes for each option.

- Engage in conversations with teachers providing teachers with feedback that challenges assumptions and biases related to race (Singleton, 2012; Wang, 2018; Whipp, 2013);
- Counsel out teachers who are unwilling to change (Khalifa et al., 2016; Whipp, 2013); or
- Develop strategies for helping teachers, even those resistant to change, become more culturally responsive (Whipp, 2013, p. 41).

Some principal aspirants provided a wider range of more specific options with fewer possible outcomes that ranged from “[addressing] the concern with the teacher,” coaching the teacher, and scheduling observations in another school.

In critiquing possible options, principal aspirants recognized the complexity of the situation including possible changes to the teacher-principal relationship, challenges of replacing the teacher in a school that was already struggling to attract teachers, the amount of time the principal will need to invest in the option, and the length of time the option might take to make a difference for students. One participant recognized the challenges of replacing teachers and maintaining positive relationships with all teachers in the building if the principal immediately counseled the teacher out of the profession.

One option is to determine that Ms. Darcy is not a good fit for the school and begins the counseling out process. One repercussion of this decision is the shortage of qualified new teachers that are willing to commit to a rural school district (Leggett & Smith, 2019. p. 40). Also, reacting in this way might negatively impact her

rapport with other teachers in the building as she did not provide coaching or feedback to help her grow or increase her effectiveness. This could also inhibit trust between the principal, [the teacher], and her teachers.

● **Research Question 3:**

How did principal aspirants compose their action plans to address issues concerning equity when responding to a written case study?

Case method allowed principal aspirants to act in the role of the leader by providing actionable next steps.

For the final prompt, principal aspirants wrote a plan for next steps. In order to do this, they first had to see themselves in the leadership role as indicated by their writing in first person. Second, principal aspirants described four phases to their follow-up meeting with the teacher: (1) opening the meeting, (2) navigating the meeting, (3) tackling the critical issues, and (4) concluding the meeting.

1. In describing how they might open the meeting, principal aspirants used phrases such as, “To begin the meeting, I would open with questions,” and “I would begin the meeting by first asking...” Almost all principal aspirants opened the meeting by asking the teacher questions.
2. In navigating the meeting, principal aspirants used language to indicate they were attempting to keep the meeting on course: “steer the conversation in the direction,” “then begin to share opportunities for growth,” and “move on to ask her which parts of her lesson she needs to improve.”
3. In reflecting on how they would tackle the critical issues, one student referred to this process as the principal would “challenge the teacher as both a friend and a coach.” Most principal aspirants provided a list of specific growth opportunities for this teacher with clearly defined next steps for each. Others described providing specific data points such as how many students were actively participating in the lesson at various points.
4. In describing how they would close the meeting, the principal aspirants envisioned a wide range of responses that included scheduling a follow-up meeting, drafting a plan for next steps, and asking the teacher to email her own reflection on the meeting.

CONCLUSIONS

Principal aspirants in principal preparation programs may not always have access to the range of experiences needed to prepare them for the job of principal. This might be especially true in programs unable to require full-time internships for principal aspirants. Crafting complex and thoughtful cases might address some of the theory-practice gaps that field experiences are unable to address. This is not to discount the value of experiences within the school and district context that require principal aspirants to observe, participate in, and lead. Case method offers an option when those experiences may not be possible.

Case method allows educator preparation program faculty to create a controlled learning experience for principal aspirants that intentionally exposes them to issues of equity they might not otherwise encounter. Principal aspirants can be provided richer background information representing multiple

perspectives to which they might not be privy within their own school setting. For this particular case, classroom teachers participating in school administration programs might be unable to fully experience evaluating and providing feedback to a teacher characterized by deficit thinking, but this case allowed principal aspirants to reflect on how they might apply the learning from their program of study to this situation.

The consequences of an administrator's less-than-stellar choices on paper are minimal compared to a poor decision in real time that involves the academic success and equitable treatment of a real teacher or student. Principal preparation that allows aspirants to participate in the scrimmage before taking a lead role in the contest, even when the provided experiences are authentically contrived as in a case study, furnishes opportunities to think critically, reflect, and even shift as other voices offer alternatives in thinking around equity. School administrators affect their schools and must lead in the ongoing cycle of seeing, engaging, and acting to create equity for all in their school setting.

As the diversity in our country, both in rural and urban settings, continues to grow (Rowlands & Love, 2021), case method offers principal preparation programs an opportunity to unearth and address inequitable thinking in a lower stakes' setting. It also provides an avenue to engage in dialogue and reflection around emerging issues of equity that might not be evident in all schools. While programs may not be able to prepare our aspiring principals to make those perfect all-knowing, or as Tappan called them "godlike" decisions (Marsden, 2021, p. 91), we can use case studies that develop the knowledge and skills connected to the behaviors identified by Grissom et al. (2011) as directly and indirectly impacting equity

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