Tell Me What You Really Think: Student Voice in Assessment Design for Educational Leadership Programs

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Student voice related to assessment, particularly in graduate educational leadership preparation programs, can be a powerful source of data to inform program development and implementation. This case study explores student experience and attitude toward assessment in two graduate-level educational leadership programs at a midwestern university in the U.S. A multi-method case study design was employed to gain an understanding of current assessment practices including focus groups, interviews, and document analysis. Findings reveal multiple themes related to students' preferences for assessment as well as the absence of language pertaining to the use of student voice in the development and implementation of assessment in available guidance documents.

Keywords: Student voice; educational leadership; assessment; case study

Faculty at Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) utilize assessment to evaluate student learning and performance on learning objectives (Ashenafi, 2017), provide formative information about instruction (Blair & Noel, 2014), and program evaluation and improvement purposes (Stein et al., 2021). Key assessments are often used to provide summative data about student and program performance. While IHEs are tasked with ensuring the validity and reliability of key assessments, the inclusion of student voice in the creation and implementation of these assessments is often neglected (Bain, 2010), as evidenced by a gap in the literature regarding student voice in higher education assessment, particularly related to educational leadership programs. This study offers new knowledge regarding key assessments by collecting and analyzing student feedback in two educational leadership preparation programs at one institution in the Midwestern U.S. For the purposes of this study, candidate and student are used interchangeably to designate participants in advanced educational leadership certification programs.

This study was conceptualized as IHE faculty were updating key assessments during program development and accreditation activities for two programs that lead to certification at the building and central office levels. During this process, it became apparent that guidance surrounding student voice was missing in available assessment resources. Literature related to graduate degree programming for educational leadership preparation programs also failed to answer questions on the topic.

Both programs were aligned to the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) standards, required state approval, and were undergoing an accreditation cycle through the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) at the time of this study while transitioning to the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards. Both programs were administered through an educational leadership department and both faculty member researchers possess PK-12 administration backgrounds and practical PK-12 experience related to student voice in education.

Importantly, candidates enrolled in educational leadership preparation programs typically have educational and professional backgrounds in assessment practices in PK-12 education, as most are current teachers or administrators. In working with these students as research participants, researchers gained access to their expertise, consultation, and informed feedback that differs from participants without experience in assessment design and implementation (Blair & Valdez-Noel, 2014; Jensen & Bennett, 2016).

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore current assessment practices in two graduate educational leadership programs to inform changes in practice while centering and demonstrating value for student voice as an equity practice. In addition to qualitative data from candidates, this study examines guiding documents for educational leadership preparation programs relating to assessment practices such as program standards, accreditation standards, and university-level documents. This study sought to address the following research questions:

1. What are current assessment practices in two educational leadership programs?
2. How do students in graduate educational leadership preparation programs at one midwestern U.S. institution describe their experiences with and attitudes toward assessment?

Literature Review and Theoretical Foundation

Students in educational leadership preparation programs typically have experience with pedagogy that typical university students do not, and when asked to share their voice for assessment and evaluative purposes, educational leadership students share expertise about how they learn and what best supports that process (Blair & Valdez-Noel, 2014). When conceptualizing this study, it was understood that by creating space for students to share their voices and lend their expertise on assessment, there was also an opportunity for participants to engage in an experience that could apply to their professional practice.

Student Voice and Assessment in IHEs

Student voice can be understood as a resource for multiple aspects of continuous improvement in IHEs (Stein et al., 2021) and the act of seeking student voice itself implies someone is poised to listen and respond, creating a culture where students feel heard, considered, and affirmed in their mattering (Blair & Valdez-Noel, 2014). Despite this understanding and over 30 years of research in the field, engagement of student voice in programmatic or curricular improvements is still not commonplace (Curl & Cook-Sather, 2021), leaving discussions of assessment in IHE settings to be dominated by the need to measure or certify learning (Ashenafi, 2017; Bain, 2010). When changes are made for improvement of programs based on student voice, they are viewed as more influential and credible by students (Stein et al., 2021), yet it remains an underutilized resource despite this and other positive implications. For example, the act of intentionally seeking student voice around aspects of curriculum benefits students' motivation, commitment, perception of shared responsibility for learning, and improved grades and course passing rates (Bovill et al., 2011; Brooman et al., 2015). Additionally, it has the potential to impact instructors' effectiveness and motivation to innovate their teaching and learning practices when student voicework is a part of the instructor evaluation process (Blair & Valdez-Noel, 2014; Brooman et al., 2015).

Student Voice and Power in IHEs

Although there is a lack of clarity and consistency in IHEs' use of student voice as a means for student empowerment (Seale, 2009), the notion of valuing student voice forces IHEs to rethink sources of knowledge, question whose perception holds power, and consider who can construct knowledge and influence learning, thus expanding the ownership of power within IHEs (Blair & Valdez-Noel, 2014). When programs invite student voice and use their findings to drive program decisions, they disrupt the normative practice of passively capturing student viewpoints, which maintains the power relationships between faculty and student (Boud, 2007; McCleod, 2011). Incorporating student voice into improvement or evaluative processes can also help to identify organizational barriers and instructor bias. This was demonstrated by Brooman et al. (2015) who found that students whom instructors had labeled as 'reluctant learners' actually shared a strong desire to learn, and described limited opportunities for engagement and 'over-zealous' attendance penalties as having a negative effect on their active engagement in class. The disconnect between instructor-perception and student-reality demonstrates how the use of

student voice can attend to bias which can negatively affect a student's experience and persistence toward degree attainment.

Student Voice and Educator Preparation Programs

When student voicework is sought to improve curriculum, instructor pedagogy and practices, or assessment, the student's voice is viewed as credible simply because student participation and positionality give them expertise in the experience (Rudduck & Flutter, 2004). In teacher and leader educator preparation programs, students have an even greater level of expertise than just experience, and their voice can serve as consultation. When students serve as consultants for teaching and learning, the relational dynamic between student and staff shifts, and both student and faculty feel a dual ownership of and responsibility towards the learning environment (Jensen & Bennett, 2016). In the case of pre-service teachers, pedagogy and assessments of learning are typically part of require coursework. Likewise, many aspiring leaders have been or currently are PK-12 classroom teachers, and pedagogy and assessment of learning are a part of their daily work. Additionally, within their graduate courses, they are learning to evaluate and create systems of shared leadership toward improvements of teaching and learning.

Being attuned to this highly experienced student population, some researchers have sought pre-service teachers' voices on specific topics such as mental health literacy (Ressler et al., 2022), yet there is little research on leadership preparation programs accessing the incredibly unique and expert voice of students for programmatic and pedagogical improvements. However, Lac and Mansfield (2018) and Bertrand and Rodella (2018), concluded that student voicework should be taught in leadership preparation programs as a social justice practice giving aspiring leaders the fluency and capacity to embed systems in the schools, they lead to amplify and empower stakeholder voice.

Conceptual Underpinnings

This work was inspired by Bain's conceptual model of Assessment for Becoming (2010). Within this model Bain provides a theoretical and practical perspective for IHEs to consider as they work towards equitable assessment practices for students (Bain, 2010). The model positions democratic dialogue as essential to equitable assessment (Bain & Golmohammadi, 2016), calling to light the ways assessment can be problematic (Bain, 2010). Rooted in critical pedagogy (Friere, 1970), this conceptual model includes a robust system of elements and features of Assessment for Becoming. In this paper, attention is focused on two components of the model, specifically the integrated features of student voices, and the encouragement of the use of critical thinking. The critical thinking aspect of the model allows for viewing the work of assessment in a different manner, creating an openness toward improvement. Additionally, the model's foundation in critical pedagogy creates space for authentic dialogue between learners and educators as equally knowing subjects, also providing an alternative focus for assessment practice that moves students away from being a passive recipient in assessment towards a discourse that supports the development of student autonomy and more effective student/academic partnerships (Bain, 2010). The integrated features of student voicework is an adaptation of Lundy's (2007) approach to Student Voice in Assessment Model and includes space, audience, and influence. Finally, it also

pulls from Batchelor's (2006) work, encouraging the idea that students have three voices— the epistemological voice, or a voice for knowing, a practical voice, or a voice for doing, and an ontological voice, a voice for being and moving forward.

Methodology

A multi-method case study design (Creswell et al., 2007; Creswell & Poth, 2016) was employed to explore student perceptions regarding current assessment practices while centering student voice. Case study methodology was adopted to allow for deeper insight utilizing focus groups, interviews. Document analysis was conducted to analyze content and address the nature of relevant documents (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), and document analysis methods to collect and analyze qualitative data from students and guidance documents.

Data for focus groups and interviews were analyzed utilizing investigator triangulation (Yin, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) whereby each of the three researchers analyzed the data, performed coding, and shared results. Furthermore, data from pertinent documents was analyzed and triangulated with focus group and interview data to strengthen validity utilizing multiple sources of data (Yin, 2018; Yin, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This multi-method approach provided a holistic description of assessment practices in both programs and contributes to the sparce literature on the use of student voice for assessment in graduate educational leadership preparation programs.

Focus Groups and Interviews

This study builds upon foundations of research that employ focus group and interview methods to generate ideas around program implementation and curricular design (Breen, 2006). More specifically, an embedded single-case design for the focus group and interview portions of this study (Yin, 2018) was employed. Focus group and interview methods were chosen to work towards both excavation of memories around assessment experience as well as development of new ideas.

Data Collection

This study utilized a purposeful (Creswell, 2013), homogenous (Suri, 2011) sampling technique. All participants were current students in one of the graduate educational leadership preparation programs and had participated in key assessments during coursework at the institution. Researchers invited current students in both programs to participate via e-mail and interest to participate was collected using a Qualtrics survey. The student researcher conducted scheduling and protocol distribution. Students were invited to participate in virtual meetings due to the nature of the COVID-19 crisis and were provided protocols a week before their session to allow for thoughtful engagement. Sessions were approximately 60 minutes long with data collection taking place during April 2021.

Understanding the importance of attending to details of verbal and non-verbal communication during virtual focus groups, the number of participants in each group was purposefully low, permitting a maximum of six participants per session. Students participated in

either focus groups or interviews according to their preference, which were offered during various days and times. In addition to focus group and interview questions, the protocol included prompts providing examples of key assessments and methods of feedback utilized in the programs.

A total of 16 students, including teachers, principals, deans, and other school or district leaders participated in four focus groups and two interviews. Participants worked across several settings including public, private, and charter schools, as well as elementary, middle, and high schools adding to the maximum variation of the sample and contributing to the transferability of the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Recruitment and subsequent data collection stopped when the research team was confident the data had become saturated and no new information was forthcoming (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2016). Prior to data collection, faculty piloted the focus group and interview questions through semi-formal focus groups with students in each program and used these findings to inform the final protocols.

Focus Group and Interview Data Analysis

Sessions were electronically recorded and transcribed, audited for accuracy, and deidentified by the student researcher before sharing transcripts with faculty researchers. All authors completed a reliability check by coding the data individually (Breen, 2006) before a final inductive method of analysis (Thomas, 2006; Yin, 2018) guided by case study methodology was conducted. The data were organized and interpreted through a process of disassembling and reassembling data by applying codes to fragments of the conversations we had with students in focus groups and interviews (Yin, 2016). This process began with open coding all interview and focus group data using qualitative analysis software. During this stage of coding researchers identified patterns within and across participant data. Next an axial coding process to organize these patterns further into categories and subcategories (Yin, 2016) was conducted. For example, initial codes like Praising the Practical and Wanting to Learn from Leaders were assigned during open coding. During the axial coding process these codes were organized as subcategories under the larger theme of Desire for Experiential Assessment, which was then placed with other themes under the larger theme of Student Preferences for Assessment.

Document Analysis

To further investigate student voice in IHE assessments for educational leadership preparation programs, a document analysis was conducted. Document or content analysis is a method for describing and interpreting the written productions of society in qualitative research methodology (Marshall & Rossman, 2014) and can serve to reduce problems and challenges associated with reflexivity (Yin, 2016). This study employed a three-step process to analyze relevant documents (Bowen, 2009) that included skimming, thorough reading, and interpretation of the text to determine the level and types of information related to student voice present in the assessment process. Additionally, each document was searched for terms such as *student* or *candidate voice, choice,* and *input*.

Documents were chosen based on influence over graduate educational leadership programs. Documents were deemed relevant to the problem and purpose of this study given that

they were the main guidance documents available at the national and university levels. All documents were approved through respective bodies (national organizations and the university) signifying completeness and comprehensiveness. All documents were considered authentic, credible, and accurate as they were retrieved directly from original author websites and university internal sources.

Building and central office standards from NELP and ELCC were analyzed. Accreditation documents included the *CAEP 2021 Standards for Advanced-Level Programs,* the *Policy Changes: Accreditation for Advanced-Level Programs* documents (CAEP, 2022), and the *CAEP Revised 2022 Standards Workbook* (CAEP, 2021). University guidance documents and website contents were obtained from college-level assessment personnel and accessed online through internal and public-facing electronic sources.

Positionality

The research team consisted of three members, two full-time tenure-track faculty, serving as program director and assessment coordinator, and one Ph.D. candidate who worked as a research assistant. According to Brooks (2015) "One glaring omission in many qualitative research studies of educational leadership is a lack of attention to the relational, power and gatekeeper dynamics that influence the study" (p. 800). To mitigate power differentials between faculty and students, the research assistant collected data and deidentified them before sharing with faculty researchers. The research team worked from the philosophical foundations of critical qualitative inquiry, holding essential the belief that reality is shaped by systems in ways that privilege some and marginalize others (Rudman & Aldrich, 2017). As educators, the researchers recognized the value in centering student voice and encouraged participants to reflect on their experiences and their relation to political and cultural systems (Darder et al., 2017). The research team brought significant histories to this work as former educators, educational leaders, and as faculty teaching and conducting research within both programs. Researchers worked individually and collectively to consider how individual histories impacted this work, knowing that tremendous responsibility accompanies conducting research from an "insider position" (Berger, 2015, p. 223).

Findings

As evident in findings from this study, students prefer assessments that are applicable, differentiated, and that they appreciate the opportunity to provide information to shape the assessment process. The document analysis confirmed that student voice is missing from guidance materials related to graduate educational leadership assessment development or implementation in a significant way. These findings provide valuable information related to the exploration of using student voice in educational leadership certification programs as well as critical program development information.

Focus Groups and Interviews

Analysis of the focus group and interview data provided a thorough understanding of student experience and opinion on assessment within the programs. According to the analysis process outlined previously in this paper, findings are categorized according to three strong themes that echoed across data collection with students including two themes related to student preferences regarding assessment, experiential and differentiated assessment opportunities, and participant perspective on student voice.

Student Preferences for Assessment

Analysis of data from focus groups and interviews provided an understanding of students' experiences with and opinions on assessment. These results reveal perceptions and descriptions of participant preferences for assessment experience and with two main themes emerging that include *Experiential* and *Differentiated Assessment*.

Experiential. Participants consistently described a preference to learn through action. They described meaningful assessment as having practical application to current or future work as educational leaders. This was summarized by one participant who stated, "I would like to see more practical application to assessments that we can use beyond our degree so that we can carry it into our careers." Results indicate that participants want to learn by doing and they described an appreciation for assessment that is active, practical, and hands-on in all focus groups and interviews. More specifically, participants described learning the most from real-life, hands-on learning experiences:

> "So far, I have really found the practical things very valuable, writing a school improvement plan, writing a communications plan, and looking at our existing plan, things that are more, almost like an internship, but not like we really have to go into."

Reiterating this notion, another participant shared that the "theories, and all that kind of stuff" were "not so much for me." Another participant addressed the notion of value in application of content to their current role:

> "I have approached everything in a way that made it meaningful for me because I was able to apply a lot of it to my existing job. So that's been the most valuable, when I could take whatever data set I'm currently working on. For example, right now we're doing a lot with our attendance data and looking at that through our continual improvement process. Being able to use that for the case study that I just said, f that was useful and valuable for me. But even things that were more theory based, I think it's all very useful to learn about though, but in terms of most valuable, the practical that I can apply from 8 to 5, and then at class at 7 and it all relates to each other."

Participants shared information related to capitalizing on strengths specific to applicable assignments. An example includes the following student quote:

> "I just love the assignments where you're able to kind of like, showcase what you know best, and I know you have to push out of your comfort zone and, obviously write scholarly articles but I agree with you, I feel like the ones where I'm able to get my hands dirty so to speak, I think it's good practice for you know, being a leader in a building."

Another participant articulated these points further by describing themselves as "hands on" and expressing interest in the opportunity to "have meetings with a superintendent or shadow a

principal or interview a principal" and to conduct "professional development based on the research I've done on this topic because those are the things that I could use."

Participants asked specifically for case studies, simulations, interviews with school leaders, mock board meetings, and other types of experiential learning. The following quotes represent much of what researchers heard pertaining to students want for real-life application:

> "I would love some real-life scenarios of things that occurred. They don't necessarily have to name names, but just real things that have happened in schools. They don't have to be long, maybe come up with a solution on our own and then maybe discuss it and try to come up with what would be the best course of action. I like those and I think that's where a lot of times I walk away with the most insight."

Another student shared:

> "So, I would like to see more of those real, what is happening in your world, who is involved, how are they involved? Here's the problem. How would you and your school solve it? I have found a little bit more of those I think are helpful."

As participants described their preference for experiential learning a related, resonant theme emerged, which was for experiential assessments to be ongoing and evolving. Several times participants asked for opportunities to develop projects over the span of their graduate program. Here a participant describes their preferences to develop a project over several classes. They also highlight the practicality of this approach according to the demands on a district leader:

> "It would be nice if, you know, 'this is a component of something that you're going to do when you get to the next class, or when you eventually take class x' and so then we could keep it and we could use it and we could build it in there… and then we would add other things around it that were relevant to the class we were in. I would love to see continuity between the classes. I think that would be great, because that's everything you do with continual improvement of schools anyway. I mean, you don't make a one-year plan, you make a three-to-five-year plan."

Differentiated. Students consistently brought forward a preference for assessment that is differentiated. Through analysis, researchers heard participants recommend more innovative assessment practices, claiming that in using a variety of methods to evidence their learning, they could have more control over their learning and the subsequent application of that learning as educational leaders. In voicing their preferences for innovative and differentiated assessment experiences, participants recommend the opportunity to represent learning in ways that felt good to them, including podcasts, mock school board meetings, developing professional learning for teachers, and analyzing budgets. While the scope of their ideas and recommendations were diverse, preferences were preferences for choice; for the opportunity and power to demonstrate understanding according to their needs and interests.

Also key within the discussion of this theme is that participants valued the professional diversity within their programs and thought it was important that assessment be differentiated according to professional role. Some students were already in positions of leadership, and their needs were different from current classroom teachers, who reported aspirations of moving into positions of leadership.

Here a current leader describes the value in being tasked with analyzing situations from their current position, as a leader:

> “I like framing you as the building leader, and how do you look at an issue as instead of the way you would have to look at it as a teacher, or the way that you would look at it as the person who was in charge of the budget. I feel like those mental exercises are very valuable because instead of just going through and saying, I can itemize a budget and I can do this, and I can follow the orders, life is going to throw you curve balls. So how are you going to [balance] the budget when you're losing 10% of your student population next year?”

Here a teacher shares their needs as an aspiring educational leader, and we hear both the theme of the preferences for experiential assessment as well as the preferences for assessment tailored to professional role:

> “I think my ideal learning style would always be in a situation where — we're trying to be prepared to be principals or leaders in a school, right? So as much exposure as we can get to different things, the better for me. I'm okay with doing a research topic on something, it might take up a lot of time. It's a good part of your grade, but I'm only really learning maybe about a couple of different aspects of school leadership, whereas if people could throw a whole bunch of problems at me, real problems, real things that you might run into a school. I think I always appreciate that because I want to know if I'm in that situation sometime, I want to have some insight into how I might react to it.”

Another teacher shares the importance of differentiation according to role:

> “I feel like we all come from a very wide range of teaching situations. I mean, I teach at a very small Catholic school. My experience may be very different from someone else. I was in a class of someone who taught in a special ed preschool, whereas then we have another person that's in a high school science class. So there are opportunities to give feedback or do assignments.”

Study participants described the need for differentiation as a response to a diverse set of skills and interests. As both graduate students and professionals versed in assessment practices, students called for the opportunity to evidence their learning using a variety of modalities:

> “You know, I think we think of assessment as a test, but you can show you learned all the same information not in a test, but maybe as a paper or maybe as a podcast, or a PowerPoint presentation that you record and share the information. I just think that when there isn't such a limit on the way we express information, I think we get a better quality of information from people when we don't put those boundaries on them.”

Another participant shared a similar perspective. They said that they would enjoy an informal conversation with their professor where they could dialogically evidence their learning. They again point to the way differentiation allows for different ways of evidencing learning, saying that in this hypothetical type of conversational assessment “they're still assessing, we're still talking about the topic and they're assessing do we really have mastery of that?”

Participants also consistently asked for the opportunity to make choices around their assessment, for their experiences to be differentiated in terms of evidence of learning according to their decision making. Here one participant explains:

> “One of the things for me would even be like, maybe a couple of options, I know that things started to change as I was going through the program, and as I was later on in the program, I was able to draw on a lot of that stuff I had before. And I almost feel like my experience level with the content grew. So, I would have loved to be able to have a choice

based off the skill set of the class I've already got right now and, maybe what I'm experiencing in the world, right at this moment, like, this is going to fit better. […] You choose your own adventure, that'd be perfect. I do those in my classes all the time and I feel like I get some better products from my students."

Value for Student Voice

As researchers move to center student voice in both research and practice, it is worth noting the feedback received from study participants regarding the study itself. Consistent were participant messages around the value of incorporating student voice in program development. Participants across professions and programs shared with the interviewer that soliciting student voice is important, that they were happy to be invited to participate in the study, and that they were appreciative. A current leader told us:

> "If you're going to be a leader and you're training to be a leader, I think it's important to be able to share your voice. And I also think it's it says a lot about [institution] that they're willing to listen to our voices."

Another participant described the centering of student voice as value added to the program and the caliber of leadership coming out of the program:

> "[institution] is building great leaders of the future. We come out of here and we can confidently say, we have the best leaders coming up, coming out of our program, because we honor student voice, and we make the changes that we need to be able to better fit the needs of our students and for them to feel confident."

Document Analysis

Document analysis provided additional information surrounding student voice and assessment in graduate level educational leadership programs. Documents analyzed lacked evidence of guidance related to student voice in assessment practices for graduate programs.

Preparation Program Standards

As with many other states, the state in which this study took place was operating under the NELP standards for both the building and district levels. These standards are adopted by the state and required for K-12 educational leadership program approval and accreditation. Documents were chosen given that they contain assessment guidance for educational leadership preparation programs at the building and central office levels. In addition, the ELCC standards were analyzed given the transitory nature of the program as it relates to standards.

The NELP standards documents, including both building and district levels, were each analyzed. Specific to assessment, the building-level standards document includes *examples of evidence of candidate competence* (NELP, 2020) for each standard and component to guide programs in collecting evidence. The examples in the document include multiple methods of assessing a candidate, however, do not offer language to include student voice in the development of assessments. The NELP building-level candidate assessment rubric guidance provides detailed information related to the development and use of rubrics, however, language

related to candidate voice is not included. Furthermore, the document references utilizing practitioner and stakeholder input during development and implementation processes, however, not from candidates specifically. No specific confirmation of candidates being included as stakeholders within the document is observed.

The NELP district-level standards include information about assessment types for measuring candidate knowledge as well as guidance for judging evidence. Consistent with building-level NELP standards, examples of rubrics and candidate competence are included, however, no evidence of the inclusion of students as stakeholders is included as it relates to assessment.

The ELCC standards for building and district levels were analyzed based on their influence over leadership preparation programs given that the standards were adopted in 2011 and utilized through 2021 signifying them as important for this study. The use of *student voice*, *choice*, *input*, or *feedback* are not apparent in the document related to assessment of candidates. The standards do highlight flexibility in how programs measure student competency and program evaluation methods based on assessment data.

Accreditation Documents

The CAEP Advanced-Level Standards and other relevant documents (CAEP 2021; CAEP 2022) were also analyzed. There are five accreditation standards for advanced level educational leadership preparation certification program providers including: (a) content and pedagogical knowledge, (b) clinical partnerships and practices, (c) candidate quality and selectivity, (d) satisfaction with preparation, and (d) quality assurance system and continuous improvement. Standard RA.5, *Quality Assurance system and Continuous Improvement* addresses assessment under subsection RA5.4 *Continuous Improvement* that states "The provider regularly, systematically, and continuously assesses performance against its goals and relevant standards, tracks results over time, documents modifications and/or innovations and their effects on EPP outcomes" (CAEP, 2022, p. 74). As with the NELP standards documents, the CAEP Revised 2022 Standards Workbook includes references to stakeholder input throughout the accreditation and program implementation processes.

The CAEP documents address *student voice*, *choice*, *input*, and *feedback* as it relates to candidate practice in the field and feedback for programming, however, these factors are not included as a potential model for leadership preparation programs specific to assessment.

University and College Guidance Documents

Analysis of relevant assessment documents and university website resources yielded that the assessment of learning includes multiple definitions (i.e. diagnostic assessment, formative assessment, summative assessment, authentic assessment, and objective assessment) along with evaluation guidance. This evaluation guidance is based on the Kirkpatrick model (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 1994) in which four levels of impact are considered including (a) participant satisfaction/reaction to learning events, (b) participant learning from learning events, (c) participant behavioral change from learning events, and (d) organizational/programmatic results across time with ongoing reinforcement.

The *Understanding Assessment at [Institution]* website was explored. This site includes information related to institution, program, and course-level assessment along with student learning outcomes and student learning more generally, however, no information about student voice or choice related to assessment is addressed, particularly for graduate programs. To investigate university level documents further, the available *Assessment Toolkit* was explored. This toolkit includes guidance on assessment planning (mission, goals, student learning outcomes, measures, targets, and findings) along with defining terminology. Program goal information addresses student voice and choice through guidance on asking questions to inform programming that include student perceptions of the most valuable skills or abilities they have developed and the knowledge they have gained from participation in programs. While these guiding questions include student voice in the evaluation process, student voice to inform the development of assessment systems is not directly addressed.

Included in available resources are multiple specific guidance and example documents in an *Assessment Toolkit Resources Repository* which was analyzed. In total, 30 documents were analyzed including 12 curricular resource documents and eight documents specific to the development of assessment plans. Direct language did not address the use of student voice in assessment design and implementation; however, documents did include topics such as applied experiences, extracurricular learning and assessment, survey methods, and exit interviews.

In general, the document analysis resulted in little to no significant results pertaining to the use of student or candidate voice in the development and implementation of assessment specifically. A summary can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Document Analysis Summary

Documents	Findings
Educational Leadership Program Recognition Standards: Building Level (ELCC)	No reference to student voice in assessment systems/practices
Educational Leadership Program Recognition Standards: District Level (ELCC)	No reference to student voice in assessment systems/practices
NELP Program Recognition Standards: Building Level	No reference to student voice in assessment systems/practices
NELP Program Recognition Standards: District Level	No reference to student voice in assessment systems/practices
CAEP 2021 Standards for Advanced-Level Programs CAEP Policy Changes: Accreditation for Advanced-Level Programs documents CAEP Revised 2022 Standards Workbook (CAEP, 2021).	Address student voice, choice, input, and feedback as it relates to candidate practice in the field and feedback for programming. Nothing specific to assessment.
University-level documents (n=30)	Information relating to applied experiences, extracurricular learning and assessment, survey methods, and exit interviews.

	Nothing specific to assessment development utilizing student voice.

Discussion

Student agency, voice, and choice are not new concepts in education. PK-12 and IHEs have been utilizing student choice and including students in the instructional process for years, however, the design and implementation of assessment is an area that needs further attention in graduate education programs, where the application of theory to practice is valued and where it is critical that students be able to participate in highly relevant assessments that will help them prepare for high levels of participation in the workforce.

This study affirmed that students appreciate the opportunity to provide feedback and voice, particularly related to assessment. Leveraging the knowledge of students who are practitioners in the field of education, with assessment expertise, provided researchers a unique perspective to inform the bridging of student-centered programming with assessments that are practicable and meaningful while meeting accreditation and accountability requirements for educational leadership preparation programs.

The need for IHEs to listen to students is critical and acutely important when faced with ongoing enrollment challenges and the maintenance of relevance to practitioners. It will be paramount for IHEs to provide engaging and authentic learning environments, particularly for working graduate students, that include relevant assessment systems based on student needs and applicability to practice. Furthermore, harnessing the power of decision-making by both students and faculty allows for planning in a manner that encompasses entire programs and the connections of the experience rather than an afterthought about assessing students for accountability purposes only.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

There are limitations to this study that stem from the fact that this research includes only one university and that there are limited documents available for analysis related to educational leadership preparation programs specifically. Future studies on this topic could include a multiple case design to provide an even more robust analysis (Yin, 2018).

There is limited literature on the use of student voice in higher education assessment, however, as IHEs compete for student enrollment and strive to continuously improve programming, it is imperative that students are consulted as part of planning and implementation processes. Future research gathering significant information from additional graduate student populations can provide even further insight into student voice and choice. Both quantitative and qualitative measures will be valuable in determining student value in their learning and how they are assessed.

Implications for Practice

Given that student voice is not common in higher education programmatic improvements (Curl & Cook-Sather, 2021) and that there is perceived value in seeking student perceptions (Blair &

Valdez-Noel, 2014; Bovill et al., 2011; Brooman et al., 2015), there are meaningful implications for practice from this research. The idea that students expressed an interest in experiential and differentiated program assessments, as indicated in findings from this study, offers valuable insight into the development and implementation of assessment. Assessments that represent utility in practice while being differentiated may provide IHEs with a student-focused experience that thoughtfully aligns assessment with course content and practice. Additionally, students reporting value for the inclusion of student voice in the assessment process sheds light on opportunities to utilize student feedback in programmatic decisions. These findings are consistent with previous research related to student ownership and power withing IHE programs (Blair & Valdez-Noel, 2014; Boud, 2007; McCleod, 2011).

Furthermore, as programs, universities, and other organizations update and create guiding documents, there may be rich opportunities to include student feedback in processes and practice in a meaningful way that is apparent in relevant documents for educational leadership preparation programs. Intentional feedback gathering could shed invaluable light on assessment practices geared toward meeting the evolving needs of future educational leaders. This could be particularly helpful for topics such as social justice (Lac & Mansfield, 2018; Bertrand & Rodella, 2018) or particularly relevant topics for program candidates.

Focus groups, interviews, and document analysis findings confirm that soliciting student voice for assessment purposes is not typical. Evidence from this study offers a perspective on how student voice and feedback is valued in practice specific to assessment in ways that can be expressed in programs and relevant documents for educational leadership programs.

Conclusion

Qualitative findings from this study provide valuable information related to the use of student voice in assessment development and administration for graduate educational leadership preparation programs. Given the significant gap in the literature around this specific topic and the importance of key assessment use and results, it is imperative that programs consciously elicit student voice to inform programmatic decisions. This allows programs and practitioners to remain relevant in their respective fields and assures students that preparation programs are responsive to their needs and the ever-changing PK-12 educational environments. This is especially true in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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