

SITUATED IN A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE: LEADERSHIP PREPARATION PRACTICES TO SUPPORT LEADERSHIP IN K-8 SCHOOLS*

Donna Braun
Robert Gable
Stacey Kite

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Abstract

This paper reports on the qualitative second phase of a mixed method study that examined the relationships among leader preparation practices and leader, school, and student outcomes through the use of two focus groups (N=8, N=7) to investigate the following research questions: (a) What practices are used by leaders to improve student achievement and to improve the school learning environment? (b) What professional learning experiences support school leaders in improving student achievement and school learning environments? A framework emerged based on the analysis to describe the core practices of school leaders and preparation programs. The framework was derived by synthesizing the focus group results, the initial survey research phase (Braun, Gable, & Kite, 2008) results, and the literature on school leader and preparation program practices. These findings support the further inclusion of specific preparation practices into leader preparation programs.

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2 Sumario en español

Este papel informa en la segunda fase cualitativa de un estudio mezclado del método que revisó las relaciones entre prácticas de preparación de líder y líder, la escuela, y resultados de estudiante por el uso de dos grupos (N=8, N de foco = 7) investigar las preguntas siguientes de investigación: ¿(U) Qué prácticas son utilizadas por líderes para mejorar logro de estudiante y para mejorar la escuela que aprende ambiente? ¿(B) lo que profesional que aprende experiencias apoya a líderes de escuela a mejorar logro de estudiante y escuela que aprenden ambientes? Una armazón surgió se basó en el análisis para describir las prácticas de centro de líderes de escuela y programas de preparación. La armazón fue derivada por sintetizar los resultados del grupo de foco, la fase inicial de investigación de inspección (Braun, Aguilón, & Cometa, 2008) resultados, y la literatura en el líder de la escuela y la preparación programan las prácticas. Estas conclusiones apoyan la inclusión adicional de prácticas específicas de preparación en programas de preparación de líder.

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3 Introduction

Successful school improvement necessitates the preparation of highly effective leaders to guide schools through the challenging, modern educational landscape (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). However, despite efforts to incorporate new practices into existing leadership preparation programs (Murphy, 1999), many in the field continue to criticize the quality of current preparation programs as inadequate to prepare leaders for today's schools (Levine, 2005). These concerns contribute to a shortage of willing and qualified school leaders (Roza, Celio, Harvey, & Wishon, 2003).

In response, many leadership preparation programs have developed and utilized what the literature refers to as *essential leader preparation practices*. While there is widespread agreement around essential preparation practices (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPoint, & Meyerson, 2005), more research is needed on the relationships between essential practices and school leaders practices, student achievement and the school learning environment (Smylie, Bennett, Konkol, & Fendt, 2005).

To add to the research, the authors used quantitative survey research (Braun, Gable, & Kite, 2008) to investigate the relationships between essential leadership preparation practices, self rated leader behavior, school learning environment, and student achievement. As a second phase to the research, this study utilized focus group interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the practices of preparation programs and of school leaders used in the service of improving student achievement and the school learning environment.

4 Background

The context that schools operate within is undergoing tremendous change. Multiple forces are influencing this change: the knowledge-based economy in which students must be prepared to participate, the continued trend of inequitable access amongst racial groups to high quality education, the growing numbers of students with minority backgrounds in public schools, mandates for accountability practices, and trends in educational funding (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

While the contexts that schools in the U.S. operate within have a dramatic impact on student achievement, school-level practices (Marzano, 2003), including teacher quality (Darling-Hammond, 2010) and school leader

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practices (Waters et al., 2003), also play an important role. Research has shown that school leader behavior and practices have a connection to both the learning environment (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Hallinger, Blickman, & Davis, 1996) and student achievement (Cotton, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2004; Waters et al., 2003).

Research has begun to identify leader behaviors that are correlated to leading for increased student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2004; Waters et al., 2003). Further, many in the field advocate for school leader's to primarily focus on improving instruction for schools to provide equitable experiences that open up access to successful pathways for all students (Bottoms & O'Neill, 2001; Brown, 2005; Elmore, 1999, 2006; Fink & Resnick, 2001; Lambert, 2005; Murphy, 2002). As such, school leaders' roles have shifted from managerial, hierarchical leadership behaviors toward ones that facilitate collaboration within the school community to improve instructional quality and student performance (Brown, 2005; Elmore, 2006). Unfortunately, many school leaders struggle to embrace this new role (Archer, 2004), due to many factors such as constraints posed by lack of autonomy in decision-making (Elmore, 1999) and those posed by collective bargaining agreements (Resnick & Glennan, 2002). Further, a large body of research suggests leaders do not feel adequately prepared by pre-service preparation or professional development programs (Archer, 2004; Brown; Elmore; Levine, 2005).

Importantly, participants of preparation programs that implement the essential leadership preparation practices that were investigated in the quantitative phase of this study, often report that the programs adequately prepared them for the rigors of school leadership (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007; Milstein & Krueger, 1997; Southern Regional Educational Board (SREB), 2005). These essential leadership preparation practices include: (a) standards-based; (b) coherent and relevant curriculum; (c) individualized content; (d) focus on shared instructional leadership; (e) focus on school reform; (f) high quality field experience; (g) problem-based learning; (h) mentoring/coaching; (i) cohort structure; habit of reflection; (j) performance assessments; (k) university, district, and organization partnerships; (l) program developers' commitment; (m) rigorous entrance requirements; (n) financial support for participants; (o) supportive district and state infrastructure; and (p) program monitoring (Braun et al., 2008).

The quantitative phase of this study examined the relationships among the essential leader preparation practices and leader, school, and student outcomes through hierarchical regression analysis of questionnaire ($N = 88$) and state data. The findings suggest that, after controlling for demographics, a significant ($p < .05$) positive relationship was found between preparation practices and leader behavior ($\Delta R^2 = .05$); preparation practices and student achievement ($\Delta R^2 = .05$); preparation practices and leaders' instructional knowledge ($\Delta R^2 = .06$); and leaders' instructional knowledge and instruction practices in schools ($\Delta R^2 = .05$) (Braun et al., 2008). This paper reports on the qualitative phase of the study in which a deeper understanding of the practices of preparation programs and school leaders' self reported behaviors were explored through the following research questions: (a) *What practices are used by leaders to improve student achievement and to improve the school learning environment?* (b) *What professional learning experiences support school leaders in improving student achievement and the school learning environment?*

5 Theoretical Rationale

The theoretical rationale rests on two assumptions: society and the education system in the U.S. exist in a constant state of change and both contribute to the current state of inequitable educational outcomes for students of different backgrounds and abilities. Dewey (1938) noted over 70 years ago that learning that involves the acquisition of static information is only helpful in a society that is preparing young people to live in a world that assumes the future will be very similar to the past. In the world we now live in, we *know* that the future will not be similar to the past because of the nature of living in the 'information age' and we *hope* that it will not be similar to the past in regards to the inequities that have and still remain a defining characteristic of this era (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Thus, adults and students need the habits of mind (e.g., processes of decision making with uncertain information, collaboration, skepticism, reflexivity, and reasoning) to continuously adapt in an ever-changing world marked by a vast amount of information to thrive in the knowledge-based economy (Cunningham, Schrieber, & Moss, 2005). Moreover, the field of

education has a responsibility to not only equalize resources to enable equity (Darling-Hammond, 2010), but to also adapt practices that enable all learners to transform themselves and the world around them (Freire, 1970).

For learners to be successful in the new economy, they need to be able to develop higher order thinking skills (Cunningham et al., 2005) and be able to relate to and work well with others (National Associate of Colleges and Employers, 2007). Thus, learning experiences need to utilize a constructivist approach (Wadsworth, 1996), wherein the learner is actively engaged in authentic experiences (Dewey, 1938) from which they construct meaning. Students must also be involved in learning experiences that involve others, as learning originates from relationships between people (Vygotsky, 1978). Finally, learning needs to be situated in real communities of practice in which individuals learn through the processes of modeling, scaffolding, reflecting, exploring, coaching, and articulating Collins, Brown, & Holum, (1991) as they move from peripheral to full participants in a community of practitioners (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Learning experiences that are situated in communities of practice should not be reserved for one type of learner (e.g., teacher or leader). Rather, all levels of learners should be exposed to these powerful experiences. Fink and Resnick (2001) call this organization of learning experiences, nested learning: multiple communities of learners learn from each other and the forms of their learning have a similar shape. Therefore, the types of learning experiences that preparation programs engage school leaders in should be nested with the learning experiences school leaders engage teachers in to provide modeling, an essential component of learning in a community of practice.

6 Methodology

6.1 Participants

All respondents ($N = 88$) to the *School Leadership Preparation Questionnaire* administered in the quantitative phase of the study (Braun et al., 2008) were invited to participate in one of two focus groups ($N=8$, $N=7$). The two focus groups were not compared; however, two groups were used to increase the possibility of data saturation (Morgan, 1997). The focus group participants were mostly elementary school principals; only one participant was a middle school principal. However, many of the participants referenced previous experience at middle schools as leaders and teachers. The majority of the respondents were women. Just over half the respondents expressed that they had excellent preparation experiences, while the other half characterized their preparation as inadequate.

6.2 Data Collection

Based on the findings of the quantitative research questionnaire results (Braun et al., 2008), an interview guide was developed using techniques described in Krueger (1998). The questions focused on understanding the leadership practices that participants had implemented to improve achievement and the preparation practices and professional development that prepared them to implement those practices. Conversations were recorded with an Olympus DS-330 digital recorder. An assistant moderator was present for both discussions, took detailed notes, and engaged the groups in a summary for verification at the end of the group interviews. The researcher served as the moderator, facilitated the conversation, and recorded field notes during the interviews.

6.3 Data Analysis

Immediately after the focus group sessions, the moderator and the assistant moderator debriefed the conversation. Subsequently, the audio recordings were transcribed and the researcher recorded categories in the blank margin through a process of reading and re-reading of the transcripts. After an initial round of coding, it emerged that three literature-derived areas would serve as broad themes to organize the data: (a) setting direction (Bottoms & O'Neill, 2001; Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), 1996; Elmore, 2006; DuFour, 2005; Hallinger & Heck, 2002; Lambert, 2005; Marks & Printy, (2003); (b) monitoring effectiveness

(Bottoms & O’Neill; Elmore; CCSSO; DuFour; Fink & Resnick, 2001; Lambert); and (c) building the intellectual and social capacity of the people in the school (Bottoms & O’Neill; CCSSO; Elmore; DuFour; Fink & Resnick; Lambert; Marks & Printy, 2003; Murphy, 2002).

After coding, a framework (Table 1) that aligned the nested core practices of school leaders and of preparation programs was derived by synthesizing the (a) the focus group results, (b) the results reported in the quantitative first phase of the study, (c) the literature on preparation practices, and the (d) the literature on leader behaviors for change. Finally, participants from the focus groups and the assistant moderator verified accuracy of the findings.

Framework of Core Practices of Leaders and Preparation Program

	Setting Direction	Monitoring Progress	Building Intellectual Capacity	Building Social Capacity for Collaboration	Building Social Capacity for Leadership
Level 1: Leader-oriented practices	“What you will go to the wall for” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowing own beliefs/vision • Articulating the focus of the school 	“Get dirty with data” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitoring progress of teachers, school and students 	“Knowing the business” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge of learning • Habits of mind 	“Best learning we do is...about ourselves” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know yourself, exploring identity • Self-assessment 	“Best learning we do is...about our leadership” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeing, shadowing, reflecting on leadership • Practicing with a mentor • Learning with colleagues
<i>continued on next page</i>					

<p>Level 2: Community-oriented practices</p>	<p>“All having the same vision”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborative development of shared beliefs and action plans for success of all kids 	<p>“Everybody in my school owns those scores”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborative progress monitoring and adjusting 	<p>“Walking the walk”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authentic intellectual development for principal and teachers. 	<p>“We are studying it together”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationships • Changing culture • Setting up structures for collaboration • Collaborative inquiry for student improvement 	<p>“Job of leaders is mostly to improve [teachers’] leadership”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full participation in community of learners to transform learners and community
<p><i>continued on next page</i></p>					

<p>Essential Preparation Practices</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program focus and rationale • Focus on improvement • Reflection • Internship • Mentor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program monitoring • Standards-based • Coherent, relevant • Individualized content • Performance Assessments • Focus on improvement • Reflection • Internship • Mentor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rigorous admission standards • Standards-based • Coherent, relevant • Problem-solving • Focus on improvement • Internship • Mentor • Cohort 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnerships • Focus on improvement • Reflection • Internship • Mentor • Cohort 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on improvement • Reflections • Internship • Mentor • Cohort • Ongoing networks of support
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Table 1

7 Results

The framework depicted in Table 1 describes the core practices of school leaders and preparation programs in an effort to answer the research questions. The framework has two levels: *level 1* practices are more leader-oriented and involve a high degree of personal exploration and reflection and *level 2* practices are more community-oriented and involve a high degree of social collaboration to reflect and explore learning and practice. The practices described by the themes and levels are not intended to be considered separately; they are all connected in the practice of learning and leading. Further, the framework does not imply that the level 1 practices should necessarily always be sequenced before level 2, as the theory of situated cognition suggests that learners need to be peripheral participants in a community of practice (represented in level 2) and gradually move toward full participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The framework represents nested learning through the representation of both the core practices that programs need to engage leaders in and the practices leaders need to engage their school community in while enacting a shared instructional leader role.

In presenting the findings for each theme, the focus group data, the questionnaire data from the first phase of the study, and the literature will be discussed from the viewpoint of what they mean for the practices of school leaders and preparation programs that are illustrated in Figure 1. Participant numbers are included in the discussion to maintain anonymity while demonstrating the broad support from participants for each theme.

7.1 Theme 1: Setting Direction

Level 1: “What you will go to the wall for.” Setting a direction for the school to move toward improvement at the first level in the framework involves the practices of (a) a leader understanding their own beliefs and vision for the school (Fullan, 1993; Senge, 2000; Waters et al., 2003) and (b) continuously articulating the focus and vision for the school. Leaders need to explore and understand their own vision for education to uncover the underlying beliefs they hold (Hudson, 2003). As one focus group participant described, “I think you really need to know who you are and basically where you want to be, where you want the school to be, and be willing to sacrifice many things to get to where you need to go” (participant 12). The sacrifice this person spoke of relates to what Cunningham et al. (2005) refer to as belief maintenance, the process of continuously re-examining beliefs in light of new learning to decide what is worth believing and what is not. One respondent articulated this idea in stating that, “Principals need to be able to know what they would go to the wall for and they need to be able to take down what they won’t” (participant 11).

In addition to personal exploration of vision and beliefs, the literature on effective leadership and on building professional learning communities clearly indicates the importance of articulating the vision, focus and direction the school is moving toward (CCSSO, 1996; DuFour, 2005). For example, participants commented that, “I do work really hard to keep my staff focused on student achievement and remain student-centered” (participant 1) and “We needed to improve our math scores, well we need to improve across the board, but we focused on math for now the last couple of years...” (participant 13).

Level 2: “All having the same vision.” Though essential, it is not enough for leaders to understand their vision and/or to articulate the school vision. To build ownership in the vision and accompanying actions, school leaders need to engage the school community as co-creators of the vision (CCSSO, 1996; DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005). One respondent spoke about her school community collaborating to create a vision that was focused on equity:

7.1.1

Participant 14: And so our school has gone from, and this was not done just with me, as the principal you set the tone, you foster the collegiality and the collaborative spirit, if you will. But, my school has gone from moderately performing to high performing school and I believe it is because we are on the same page in terms of our vision and our purpose, which is success for all kids, regardless of their backgrounds.

Implications for preparation practices. Murphy (2006) calls for preparation programs to develop and articulate their own focus and vision. In doing so, they model this practice for school leaders. Further, to support school leaders in developing their vision, focusing the school in a direction, and developing a shared vision with staff, preparation programs can help participants explore their vision of education through the practice of reflection. Also, a focus on school reform and improvement in the context of an internship with a mentor can help participants learn the skills involved in both focusing a staff and developing a shared vision with staff.

7.2 Theme 2: Monitoring Progress

Level 1: “Get dirty with data.” The literature on the need to monitor the progress of teachers, students, and the school climate is strong (Bottoms & O’Neill, 2001; CCSSO, 1996; Elmore, 2006; DuFour, 2005; Fink & Resnick, 2001; Lambert, 2005; Leithwood et al., 2004; Waters et al., 2003). Indeed, one participant articulated the importance through the following advice: “Get dirty with data and design plans for the next steps around PD, assessments, and accountability.” Participants spoke of monitoring the progress of both students and teachers. For example, participant 9 stated, “I found it particularly helpful to look at assessment results on the (state assessment). I tried to pinpoint different areas in math and reading and writing where there might be certain groups of children or teacher, perhaps where improvement can be made.” Finally, participants also spoke of the need to monitor teacher progress to facilitate decision-making about whether they should remain in service at the school. For example:

7.2.1

Participant 12: My first question...what are you here for? And if the answer wasn't that I am here for kids, then boy did I really have to go in and do my evaluations and makes sure that I got everything right in order for them to say its time for you to go. And that is exactly what I had to do...

As is clear from many of the comments above, the practices involved in monitoring progress are deeply connected to those involved in setting a direction for the school. Many of the comments about monitoring progress focused on knowing where you are to know where you need to go. The literature supports the importance of goal-setting, tracking, and adjusting for students, teachers, and leaders to grow individually and together to develop ownership over their progress, and believe that there growth is due to their effort, not just to an innate ability (Bottoms & O'Neil, 2000; Resnick, 1995).

Level 2: Everybody in my school owns those scores.” DuFour et al. (2005) assert that the power in monitoring progress is in doing it collaboratively, as a school and/or in teams. Many participants spoke to this type of effort in their work. One participant described efforts to collaboratively monitor progress by examining student work: “one improvement...deliberate time in analyzing student work and then asking ourselves what are our next steps for these students...” (participant 11).

Implications for preparation practices. In keeping with the importance of modeling good practice, preparation programs should engage in the practice of continuously monitoring and improving their own practice. The findings from the focus groups also suggest that aspiring leaders should be continuously engaged in rigorous reflection of their leadership development against standards of practice and demonstrate progress through performance assessments. This reflection is essential for aspiring leaders to be self-directed in advocating for their needs and thereby pushing preparation programs to differentiate for their individual needs. Further, the purpose of this type of self-monitoring should be made explicit so that aspiring leaders can engage their faculty in the same process. Finally, the focus group participants highlighted the need for the curriculum of preparation programs to include authentic engagement in understanding the relationships between data, assessment, and progress monitoring for improvement through internships with mentors.

7.3 Theme 3: Building Intellectual Capacity

Level 1: “Knowing the business.” The first practice in level 1 of this theme is growing the intellectual knowledge of issues related to learning (e.g., curriculum, instruction, and assessment). Respondents referred to the need for deep and ongoing learning articulated in the following comments: “...you need to know your research, it needs to be updated and you need to be able to quote and pass it out.” (participant 11) and “when I try to lead something or a change...I need to do a lot of preparation for myself...having research and I guess my own homework...” (participant 15).

The other practice in the first level of this theme is for leaders to develop the habits of mind to appropriately use their knowledge of learning. The ways these two practices are inextricably connected can be seen in a piece of dialogue from one focus group. In reaction to the comment, “I think so much of our job is reactive, but we also have to be proactive...” (participant 15) another participant articulated the connection between knowledge and habits of mind by saying, “I think one of the ways to be proactive is to know the business...” (participant 6). Being proactive, along with developing other habits of mind like making sound decisions, listening, being flexible, and being open minded were brought up as essential practices by many focus group participants. One focus group participant articulated these in a few different ways:

7.3.1

Participant 8: “I still have those days, where I pause and I stay there and think...one of the things my mentor taught me that I always use, is to say, ‘I’ll think about it, I’ll speak with you in a little while’...certainly in a crisis you have to act on your feet, but with other things...you shouldn’t always just respond. You need to think and you do need to listen...you have to be really prepared and be thoughtful...what is emerging is that we have to be so flexible...”

Level 2: “Walking the walk.” Level 2 is based on the premise that the knowledge and habits of mind discussed in level 1 are essential, but not enough in and of themselves, to build intellectual capacity of leaders and teachers (Elmore, 2006); leaders need to be engaged in authentic, situated experiences to effectively build their intellectual capacity to lead. Further, leaders need to build teachers’ intellectual capacity in the same manner.

The most powerful forms of building intellectual capacity that focus group participants discussed were those related to authentic, situated learning experiences, most often discussed in terms of their internships or other practical experiences. The literature on preparation practices and on learning in general, provides strong support for learning to be authentic (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Cunningham et al., 2005; Lave & Wenger, 1991). The lack of such experience in preparation programs is likely one of the biggest reasons people report feeling dissatisfied with their preparation programs (Levine, 2005). The following comments from focus group members illuminate this notion: “I don’t think there were any courses I took that were especially helpful” (participant 9) and “What prepared me? My college program did not...” (participant 11).

On the contrary, the focus group participants who referenced quality internships spoke of those experiences in a positive way. For example:

7.3.2

Participant 3: “having the whole year to see the ins and outs of what could happen on a given day...so you really got a taste of reality...go and experience it first-hand was really powerful...experience them in living color...immersed in a lot of tragedy and problem solving. So, you kind of felt your first year, I don’t know, I think I’m prepared!”

Participants also noted the importance of the authentic experiences they engaged in during their first years of the principalship. For example, “I don’t necessarily feel that I was prepared enough. I learned getting bumps and bruises along the way. But experience to me is really a good teacher...” (participant 14).

Focus group participants also discussed their efforts to build the intellectual capacity of teachers. One participant noted the importance for principals to be prepared in authentic contexts by quoting Richard Elmore: “the effect of professional development on practice and performance is inverse to the square of its distance from the classroom” (Elmore, 2006, p25).

Importantly, building intellectual capacity is connected to building social capacity for collaboration. While a tremendous amount of effort has been made to build intellectual capacity of individuals through professional development, there is growing acknowledgement, in line with Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of learning as being socially constructed, that powerful learning for adults needs to be collaborative (Lave & Wenger, 1991; DuFour, 2005; Spillane; 2000). The next theme, *Building Social Capacity for Collaboration* further explores this notion.

Implication for preparation practices. Rigorous admission standards and the use of a relevant and standards-based curriculum for preparation programs can ensure that aspiring leaders have and/or gain extensive knowledge of learning and the habits of mind described in level 1 to be successful. Questionnaire findings from the quantitative phase (Braun et al., 2008) of this study and the focus group findings suggest that preparation programs may be doing a better job engaging in these level 1 practices than they are in level 2 practices to build intellectual capacity. To improve level 2 practices, preparation programs could involve participants in authentic, situated learning experiences to allow them to build intellectual capacity for themselves, but also to model how to build similar types of experiences for teachers. Preparation programs can do this through high quality internships, mentor relationships, and collaborative problem-based learning.

7.4 Theme 4: Building Social Capacity for Collaboration

Level 1: “Best learning we do is...about ourselves...” To develop collaborative learning relationships to others meaningful, school leaders need to know themselves. As one participant put it, “the best learning we do is the learning we do about ourselves and our leadership...” (participant 11). Another participant expressed a process Cunningham et al. (2005) describe as essential to growth:

7.4.1

Participant 7: I did not become a principal to make it easier on myself. There is lots of failure, there were lots of personal tragedies, there were lots of things I have lost along the way to get good at what I am doing. So, sacrifice is key. There is blood given, there is heart given, there are spiritual bankruptcies that happen along the way. And that is part of the job and the ability to continually renew and recreate oneself is essential.

The struggle that school leaders must go through to grow and transform their identity and practice is the same struggle that they must guide school communities through to transform the culture toward one focused on collaborative learning and student achievement. However, exploring personal strengths and identity, as described in level 1, is not a prerequisite for effective collaboration. Indeed, it is often most powerful when it happens in conjunction with the social collaboration described in level 2.

Level 2: “We are studying it together...” At the heart of the modern conception of school reform is the notion of the importance of developing professional learning communities (Dufour et al., 2005). While nearly all the practices described in the framework in Table 1 are essential practices of a professional learning community, the heart of such work is the engagement of the school community in collaborative inquiry to improve student learning (CCSSO, 1996; DuFour, 2005; Hudson, 2003; Spillane, 2000). Developing a culture of collaborative inquiry requires leaders to transform the identity of educators in the school and therefore the community toward a new conception of professionalism described by Elmore (1999) as one in which autonomy and personal attributes are minimized and the collaborative professional practice of improving instruction is maximized. The focus group participants articulated four areas of practices that are essential to building a culture of collaboration toward improvement: (a) building relationships; (b) learning culture to change it; (c) setting up structures for collaboration and (d) engaging in collaborative inquiry.

One respondent expressed the importance of relationships succinctly in the statement, “it is all about relationships” (participant 8). Moreover, a different participant articulated the connection between forming relationships and changing culture, “You need to build relationships and gain trust with your staff. I believe that is very important for you to move forward...” (participant 14). In exposing the need to learn about a school culture through changing it, one participant described a leadership situation as “an absolute failure, because I moved too quickly and I didn’t learn the building, I didn’t study the history, the norms, and the cultures of that building and there was a mutiny” (participant 14). The conversation continued to explore the “fine juggling act” involved in learning and changing the culture and concluded with the following statement: “you need to become part of a culture or bond or grow relationships with people before you change the dominant culture or while you change it...” (participant 11).

Principals need to concurrently build relationships, learn the culture of a school, and set up structures that will support collaborative inquiry. A few participants described in detail the structures that have allowed collaboration to improve student achievement.

7.4.2

Participant 2: a lot of it was scheduling and so I was able to link the reading teacher to the team at grade level...that was a big piece because it was now literacy across the curriculum because they were able to support the cores during common planning time...I was able to move special education teachers on team as well...

To build educators’ capacity to collaborate, the school community must be engaged in the act of collaborating. Numerous examples of collaborative inquiry were expressed by focus group participants as essential efforts toward improving their schools. In supporting the shift of focus from teaching to learning, one participant described that his faculty involved in, “deliberate time in analyzing student work and then asking ourselves, what are our next steps for these students?” (participant 11). Another stated that “the collaborative planning model has really allowed teachers to break down that isolation and share practice...” (participant 2). In the same spirit, another participant described the type of the professional learning experiences her staff engages in: “we have study groups, we have topics, read books, look at student work. We are not hiring an outside guru, we are studying it together” (participant 6).

Implication for preparation practices. The questionnaire results from the quantitative phase (Braun et al., 2008) of this study suggest that preparation programs are already moving toward the critical practice that defines the first level of *Building Social Capacity for Collaboration* – engaging aspiring leaders in reflecting on and exploring their growth and identity as learners. Unfortunately, in relation to level 2, preparation programs may not be engaging aspiring leaders in experiences that promote their ability to facilitate the practices involved in transforming school culture and engaging faculty in collaborative inquiry. Gonzalez et al. (2002) found that the amount of course titles in preparation programs that focused on school culture and collaboration was dwarfed by courses on the contexts of schools and suggest that the focus on culture and collaboration should be increased. McCarthy (1999) cites evidence that leaders who saw collaborative work modeled between instructors in their preparation programs were more likely to engage in collaborative behavior themselves. Further, McCarthy cautions that cohorts have only been found to be significantly useful when they are utilized as a laboratory for collaborative inquiry and learning and not just as a structure.

Overall, it is essential for preparation programs to explicitly model collaboration in multiple authentic ways: between instructors, between aspiring leaders and mentors, and between cohorts of learners. Further, aspiring principals can engage in practices to build their own and their staff’s social capacity to collaborate by engaging in personal reflection and by practicing the facilitation of collaborative inquiry while in internships with mentors.

7.5 Theme 5: Building Social Capacity for Leadership

Level 1: “Best learning we do is...about our leadership...” This level explores how leaders learn the practice of leadership by working with other leaders in communities of practice. Thus, the theory of situated cognition through legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) is highly influential in exploring how school leaders develop their identity and practice in relation to each other. Essentially, Lave and Wenger postulate that newcomers to a community of practice need to engage in the actual, authentic practice of the community with more experienced members. Further, their learning experiences need to be scaffolded as they move from peripheral to full participation. As such, school leaders need to be involved in multiple ways of learning about their leadership: (a) shadowing and watching practicing school leaders; (b) practicing along side mentors; and (c) learning with colleagues in practice. However, as with the other themes and practices in the framework, these ways of involvement are not linear and can actually be happening all at the same time.

The research base is strong regarding the importance of school leaders learning with high quality mentors in internships (Peterson, 2002) to develop effective leadership practices and to transform their identity and role (Brown-Ferrigno, 2003). There are essentially two ways that aspiring leaders participate in internships with mentors: through shadowing and through practicing with the support of mentors. One participant captured the essence and power of shadowing in the following statement.

7.5.1

Participant 2: I think that there are a lot of things that you learn just by shadowing when you are in an internship program and you are shadowing that person and taking on your own projects too. But I think there are a lot of things that you pick up that you are not even conscious that you are even picking them up. It’s like when your mother’s a good cook and then you start to cook. There are things that you do just because you have seen somebody do them. You are not even conscious that they are things that you do, but things come to you as you are in the situation yourself.

The relationship that this participant had with her mentor represents a need many participants expressed - having colleagues to learn with and from during preparation and practice. One participant expressed this by saying, “we have all gone into the office and closed the door and picked up the phone and called one of our best principal colleagues and said, ‘Oh my god, you won’t believe what I just got faced with! What do I do?’...” (participant 8).

Participants also spoke of the importance and power of more formal networks of colleagues. As one participant commented, “The networks that I formed, the Novice Principal Network, the Kennedy Mentor Principals, and now the Learning Leader Network, those prepared me to help me make those improvements” (participant 11). Other participants saw the cohorts of learners that they were involved in during the preparation in the same way. One participant described her experience:

Participant 3: ...one of the things I do remember though is what everyone has said, having a network of people to bounce off of. So, in the PRN we are looking at some of the best mentors in R.I. who we’re studying under and we all came together as a group, mentees and mentors, to problem-solve how our district was going to get through the opening of a school year with 9/11 and a two-week strike. So, all the principals and all the mentees came together and devised a plan on how we were going to open our school those first days – it was powerful.

7.5.2

Participant 3: ...one of the things I do remember though is what everyone has said, having a network of people to bounce off of. So, in the PRN we are looking at some of the best mentors in R.I. who we’re studying under and we all came together as a group, mentees and mentors, to problem-solve how our district was going to get through the opening of a school year with 9/11 and a two-week strike. So, all the principals and all the mentees came together and devised a plan on how we were going to open our school those first days – it was powerful.

Level 2: “Job of leaders is mostly to improve [teachers’] leadership.” While honing practice with colleagues is so important for school leaders to engage in for the sake of their leadership practice and identity, it is just as important for the sake of building the leadership capacity of teachers in their school community. Elmore (1999, 2006) and Lambert (2005) assert, and the ISLLC standards support (CCSSO, 1996), that an essential practice of a school leader is to build the leadership capacity of everyone else in the community. The ideal journey of a school focused on the practice of improvement is one that is transforming the community of practice of educators through developing and sharing leadership amongst all the participants (Elmore; DuFour, 2005; Lave & Wegner, 1991).

As one focus group participant put it, “the job of the leader is mostly to improve their [teachers] leadership, and that is really what we study as principals...” (participant 11). On this level, a leader’s practice shifts from a focus on their own role as a leader and works to develop and distribute leadership amongst the educators in the school. While there were not as many comments from participants on this practice, there were a few very powerful examples. One participant described her efforts to do this in the following ways: “I basically have turned around and given the work back to them. I have shown them how to do it, I have directed them to do it, I’ve provided opportunities for them to do it and lead...” (participant 5). Another participant described her practice in empowering her staff in the following way:

Participant 4: you have to establish a culture where you’ve empowered your staff to become problem-solvers as well and not just come to you with the problem, but come to you with the problem and how about this for a solution. So, I think if you take on that role as solving everyone’s problems, they are going to come to you with their problems. And I often say the first day of school that you know, I am the final word on discipline, but you need to bury your own dead out there because once you send them to me, you have lost your power...

7.5.3

Participant 4: you have to establish a culture where you’ve empowered your staff to become problem-solvers as well and not just come to you with the problem, but come to you with the problem and how about this for a solution. So, I think if you take on that role as solving everyone’s problems, they are going to come to you with their problems. And I often say the first day of school that you know, I am the final word on discipline, but you need to bury your own dead out there because once you send them to me, you have lost your power...

Implication for preparation practices. Preparation programs need to engage aspiring leaders in the practices described in this theme through high quality internships with high quality mentors and through involvement in cohorts that serve as authentic learning networks for school leaders. Again, in line with the nested nature of the framework, if preparation programs engage leaders in these powerful experiences and make explicit the beliefs and assumptions behind the experiences through modeling and reflection, leaders will then engage their faculty in similar experiences. The highest hopes for the effect of this nested learning is for teachers to then understand how to use the same practices to empower students as leaders and as such build students efficacy, ownership, and engagement in self-directed learning in the same way leaders and teachers have been engaged.

8 Implications

8.1 For Action

Preparation programs should continue to use and/or further integrate the essential preparation practices that were found to have a significant relationship to leader behavior, school learning environment and students achievement in the quantitative phase of the study (Braun et al., 2008) and affirmed through the focus group results (last row of Table 1). These results suggest that, when implemented and used to model effective leader behavior, the practices can support aspiring leaders to build needed knowledge, skills and disposition. That said, the results from this study also suggest more attention needs to be paid to certain preparation practices.

Though all the essential preparation practices are important, the first phase of the study Braun et al. (2008) revealed that that some may be easier for preparation programs to integrate (i.e., standards-based, performance assessments, problem-based, individualized, coherent curriculum). These preparation practices support the first three core leader practices discussed in Table 1: setting direction, monitoring progress, and building intellectual capacity. It appears that these preparation practices may help school leaders develop the foundation needed to be an instructional leader. However, as the results of this study and those of Marks and Printy (2003) suggest, it is not enough for leaders to be instructional leaders, they must also have the skills to engage the entire school community in a collaborative effort to share instructional leadership to transform the culture of the school toward one of improvement.

Preparation programs need to be careful not to stop short of implementing the remaining essential preparation practices (i.e., focus on instructional improvement/equity, internship, mentor, cohort, and reflection), as these are the practices that provide a high degree of support for leaders to develop the last two leader practices defined in Table 1: building social capacity for collaboration and building the social capacity for leadership. These two practices are needed for leaders to be successful in the new role of school leaders – transformation of the school community toward one focused on shared responsibility for improvement.

Finally, as Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) noted, the type of preparation practices described in this study are quite costly to implement and state and district policies need to support the use of these practices. State and district policymakers need to find ways to support both policy and funding decisions that will help preparation programs to include all the essential preparation practices, especially the most costly – internships and mentors.

8.2 For Research

Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) discuss the importance of understanding beyond whether it is important for a preparation practice to be used, but rather how it is used. Therefore, it is recommended that future research investigate what defines the quality of the essential preparation practices, especially those that are difficult and costly to implement. Specifically, it is recommended to conduct research that investigates the relationship between the qualities of effective internships and effective mentor relationships and the outcomes of leader behavior, the school learning environment and student achievement. Further, to understand the impact of using high degrees of all the essential preparation practices, it is recommended that more research like Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) be conducted to compare the impact of preparation programs that use high degrees compared to those that don't use high degrees of essential preparation practices.

Finally, the role of professional development after an aspiring leader obtains certification and a position as a school leader is an important area of study. Richard Elmore states that it is in the role of school leader that people will learn the skills needed only if the system they are in supports their development (Crow, 2008). The importance of ongoing professional development through involvement in a professional network of school leaders was mentioned frequently during the focus group interviews. As such, understanding what makes for powerful professional development networks for school leaders is also a needed area of research.

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