

School Administrators Sound Off: Perceived Efficacy of Principal Preparation Programs from Select Focus Group Responses

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Abstract

This focus group study is follow-up to research done in the USA at a north Texas Independent School District during the Spring of 2010. All administrators holding a valid Texas Principal Certification and employed by the target school district were surveyed about their varied perceptions regarding university and proprietary principal preparation programs. Senior administration from the target school district selected the focus group participants including: two central office administrators (an Associate Superintendent, a Director of Professional Development), and one Principal from an elementary (grades K-4), intermediate (grades 5-6), middle (grades 7-8), and high school (grades 9-12). The six administrators were brought together to explore themes, give depth and comment on the survey results gathered. The school leaders commented extensively on the principal preparation programs in which they had participated. Areas of response concentration included: program efficacy in management skills training, program efficacy in certification test preparation, how well programs connected theory to practice and the strengths and weaknesses of delivering principal preparation programs in online formats. The educational leaders were encouraged to follow alternate themes they felt to be important to the effective preparation of educational administrators. The ninety minute session yielded valuable data about the strengths and weaknesses of current school administrator preparation programs.

Keywords: principal preparation, online instruction, administrator certification, test preparation.

Introduction

This focus group study is follow-up to research done in the USA at a north Texas Independent School District during the Spring of 2010. The original research was a quantitative examination of school administrator opinions about principal preparation programs. The results were presented in a roundtable discussion at the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration Summer 2010 Conference and appeared in the article *Developing Capital Improvement in Principal Preparation Programs* (Borgemenke, 2011). The survey was administered to all staff employed at the target district who held a valid Texas Principals Certification at the time of participation. Areas of response concentration included but were not limited to: program efficacy in management skills training, program efficacy in certification test preparation, how well programs connected theory to practice and the strengths and weaknesses of delivering principal preparation programs in online formats.

The results of the survey provided some interesting insights:

The respondents to this survey seem to be telling us several things of note. They believe that practical skills and knowledge gained during the preparation program were important to their success as they assumed the administrative role. They also believed that there are practical skills and knowledge that can only be learned while actually in the leadership position. It might be safe to deduce that the administrators would welcome increased opportunities to gain practical administrator skills and knowledge in an authentic clinical setting. This is confirmed by the indication that a closer relationship between the university based principal preparation program and the school district is desirable. The survey responses also seem to indicate that the administrators find some value in having a university based principal preparation program that provides theoretical and foundational knowledge about educational leadership. Presumably they have found that knowledge about foundational theory is of value in performing the tasks as school administrator.

The results from the survey may have generated more questions than it answered. Some future inquiry might include:

- Is the current job of school principal, with its broad scope and specialized skills and knowledge, beyond the abilities of a reasonably competent individual?
- Has the exponential growth in the roles and responsibilities of school principal the result of an increased thrust of site based decision making or increased regulatory responsibilities?
- Will a pk-20 partnership between school districts and institutions of higher education result in a loss of academic freedoms?
- With the documented need for continuous training of school administrators while they serve in leadership positions, where will the funding sources be found to provide higher education personnel time to assist in professional development programs and provide release time for the school administrator to participate in the new partnerships?

The recent growing popularity and widespread availability of online social networking, mobile web access, text messaging and podcasting would lead one to believe that there exists a preference for asynchronous digital forms of communication. That being said, one might have anticipated the survey would reveal administrators wanting degrees available in an online learning format. That was not the case, as a wide majority disagreed with a 100% online format for a principal preparation program. The response does not preclude that portions of the coursework would be desirable delivered online, just not the entire program. (Borgemenke, 2011, pp. 16-17.)

The focus group was assembled to gain a qualitative component to the examination of educational leader perceptions of principal preparation programs. Focus group research has been described as “a way of collecting qualitative data, which essentially involves engaging a small number of people in an informal group discussion (or discussions), ‘focused’ around a particular topic or set of issues” (Wilkinson, 2004, p. 177). This informal probing was seen as an effective method to explore the participant perceptions in greater depth.

Method

Focus Group Participants

Senior administration from the target school district selected the focus group participants including: two central office administrators (an Associate Superintendent, a Director of Professional Development), and one Principal from an elementary (grades K-4), intermediate (grades 5-6), middle (grades 7-8), and high school (grades 9-12). The six administrators were brought together to explore themes, give depth and comment on the survey results gathered. The school leaders commented extensively on the principal preparation programs in which they had participated. Areas of response concentration included: program efficacy in management skills training, program efficacy in certification test preparation, how well programs connected theory to practice and the strengths and weaknesses of delivering principal preparation programs in online formats. The educational leaders were encouraged to follow alternate themes they felt to be important to the effective preparation of educational administrators.

Procedure

The ninety minute session provoked vigorous responses and yielded valuable data about the strengths and weaknesses of current school administrator preparation programs. The principal investigator documented the session utilizing real-time note taking and an audio recording of the focus group session for later review and coding. The method used to analyze the data is based on a process of focus group response evaluation developed by Richard Krueger (Krueger, 2000). Krueger suggests that a tape based narrative analysis can yield a moderately high level of rigor and a low risk of error. The broad response themes given by the focus group members were identified and categorized.

The focus group moderator concentrated on exploration of six of the questions from the survey administered in that school district. The questions selected closely represent the three areas of response concentration. Those included were:

- The practical information about educational administration gained from the coursework required for my degree/certification has been immediately useful in my role as an administrator.
- Specialized knowledge gained since obtaining the degree or certification could only have been learned in the field after program completion.
- I would rather the entire degree/certification program be delivered in an online format.

- The coursework at the degree/certification program included a significant amount of time exploring innovative leadership topics.
- College/University principal certification programs should partner with local school districts in designing courses that provide practical administrative skills.
- The higher education principal certification program should concentrate on providing administrators with foundational theory about educational management and leadership.

Response Topics

The practical information about educational administration gained from the coursework required for my degree/certification has been immediately useful in my role as an administrator.

Participants had a hard time separating the textbook learning they had from the learning they got while they interned or what they learned by doing the job. One principal put it this way; “it is hard for me to separate what I learned about being a principal from whom or where or when I got it”. There seemed to be a general feeling that the practical knowledge they had came from actually doing the job. The group seemed to feel that the information gained from the coursework in their principal preparation programs was imbedded in their knowledge base, but was not as easily quantified as the experience gained from actually being a school administrator.

Specialized knowledge gained since obtaining the degree or certification could only have been learned in the field after program completion.

All participants responded that there are unique skills and knowledge required to be a principal that you only completely understand by doing the job. Group members mentioned budgeting, motivating staff, and leadership. One participant described the coursework provided on the topics of leadership and motivation as “nebulous”. The group agreed that a better focus on these topics would help a new school administrator to perform better when they entered the position.

I would rather the entire degree/certification program be delivered in an online format. This question engendered great response. All of the respondents seemed to feel that a 100% online program could not transmit the needed intangibles required to do the job. Some cited the valuable nature of the cohort bonding experience that they experienced during their programs. They felt that the face to face meetings created a synergistic effect that they felt couldn't be replicated in an online delivery. They also felt that they had built a support network that was very useful when seeking information and assistance while working as an administrator. One member did have an interesting comment, “of course we have not grown up using the internet as a learning tool, if you asked this same question to a young recent graduate, you might find that they would be comfortable having the program entirely online”.

The coursework at the degree/certification program included a significant amount of time exploring innovative leadership topics.

This was an area that generated a good deal of passionate comment. The panelists had a feeling those professors who had not been in the field as administrators in the past 5 years seemed not to be aware of innovative leadership practices. One administrator commented “to lead, you need to read”. Another posed the question for university professors and field mentors of prospective administrators, “what are your moral and intellectual responsibilities?” It seems that many times these school leaders perceive the internship has a “check it off and get it done” quality. The group members cited special concern with online programs turning into a checklist degree.

College/University principal certification programs should partner with local school districts in designing courses that provide practical administrative skills.

The administrators were very interested in having participation by the university in their professional development programs. Many felt strongly that the professional development activities that school districts engage in were very useful in their career development. Questions were raised about the possibility of having those genuine job embedded activities count towards principal program certification activities. The focus group members also mentioned having current administrators teach courses for the university program on a paid basis. It was felt that those administrators currently serving in the field could transmit practical skills and knowledge to prospective administrators more effectively than a professor that had not been in the schools in a long period of time.

The higher education principal certification program should concentrate on providing administrators with foundational theory about educational management and leadership.

Many in the group expressed agreement that university programs should have foundational theory as a core component of their program. There was some apparent value attached to that knowledge by the members of the group. There were however many comments about having more practical knowledge incorporated into the principal preparation program. Several indicated that they felt the programs they participated in concentrated on roles of administrators instead of the day to day practical skills needed to operate a school successfully. The moderator attempted to draw an analogy between administrator internships and other professionals such as lawyers, architects and engineers having long internships provided by their employers after they have completed coursework and passed certification examinations as a model that might be useful. All of the participants of the focus groups felt that the comparison was not a valid one. They commented that public education was not a “money making business” and thus comparisons to firms that train other professionals expecting a return on investment are not appropriate for school personnel.

Discussion

The focus group discussion revealed some core themes:

- The group felt that the work they do in professional development should be credited toward program completion requirements.
- They also felt that some principal preparation coursework can be “nebulous” and unconnected to the actual skills and knowledge that is needed to do the everyday tasks of a school administrator.
- Principal preparation programs need to incorporate a strong component of instruction in leadership and motivation budgeting into their curriculum.
- The responses from the group were in general negative toward having totally online principal preparation programs.
- The economics of education.

These administrators seemed to be voicing some specific concerns about principal preparation programs. While they did find value in the core concepts that the principal preparation programs espouse, they also felt that the programs were lacking in the themes listed above. The feeling that “universities are trying to do it to us” was a memorable quote by one member. The desire of the practitioners to have a greater voice in the development of educational leaders was apparent. The moderator attempted to explore k-12 public school and university partnerships with the group. The members could not immediately suggest a framework that would provide for such a partnership. Some suggested that principal preparation programs accept professional development activities done by school districts for some level of credit towards certification. It was made clear that the school district resources were stretched to the limit and any partnerships would have to be shouldered by the preparation programs. As one senior administrator said, “you can’t lay anymore on the districts...I will protect our principals and team members time...there has to be some financial incentives...any partnership has to be an equal partnership”. The economics of education entered the conversation several times. The administrators all voiced concerns about the level of funding that schools are provided with. The group members expressed the desire to partner with many stakeholders if provided with the appropriate resources to do so. All group members rejected the application of a strict business model being applied to public schooling. A member said “it is not money in, money out in public education”.

The final sense that one gets from listening to and analyzing the responses from this group are positive and hopeful. Each member has strong feelings for the importance of public education and expressed those during the focus group. The members all expressed a desire for principal preparation programs to provide more opportunities for prospective administrators to develop leadership capabilities. Leadership abilities from the short term day-to-day skills necessary to run a school to the long-term visionary leadership to develop 5 to 10 year plans that is also vital to the success of a school administrator. Commenting on leadership, one focus group member put it aptly, “how are we truly creating a new dynamic learning experience for future educational administrators that will help them lead us into the 21st century teaching/learning environment”?

References

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