



Building bridges between knowledge and practice

A university-school district leadership preparation program partnership

Karen L. Sanzo and Steve Myran

*Department of Educational Foundations and Leadership,
Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia, USA, and*

Jennifer K. Clayton

*Department of Educational Leadership, The George Washington University,
Newport News, Virginia, USA*

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide a Year 1 account of a partnership between a university and rural school district focusing specifically on how the project has helped to bridge the theory to practice divide and strengthen university-district ties.

Design/methodology/approach – A design-based research paradigm was utilized to investigate how creating more authentic and contextually relevant university-school partnerships and embedding leadership preparation in the context of practice may help build stronger bridges between theory and practice.

Findings – The findings highlight that holistic approaches to leadership preparation, developing relationships, coordinating meaningful professional development, realism in design and experiences, and introspection are all ways that cohort members, as well as other district personnel, have been able to build stronger bridges between theory and practice.

Practical implications – The findings can assist universities and districts in developing and supporting partnerships that contribute to relevant, practical, and meaningful leadership preparation.

Originality/value – The authors' analysis highlights that aspiring leadership students who do not engage in meaningful and contextually relevant activities will not be able to bridge the theory to practice gap when working in the actual leadership field. Authentic experiences provide realistic views and understandings of the requirements, challenges, and rewards of educational leadership positions.

Keywords United States of America, Schools, Universities, Rural areas, Leadership, Partnership

Paper type Research paper



Preparation of aspiring educational leadership has historically been provided by universities (McCarthy and Forsyth, 2009). Recent changes in the landscape of leadership preparation, resulting in part from criticisms of universities who are out of touch with their PK-12 counterparts (Levine, 2005; Murphy, 2005; Walker and Qian, 2006; Young *et al.*, 2002) has resulted in new approaches to providing training for aspiring school leaders. One of these approaches to school leadership preparation is a partnership between a university and school district (or districts) to jointly prepare individuals with a meaningful, contextually relevant, and well-focused intent. Research on university-district partnerships is lacking in the existent literature (Simmons *et al.*, 2007) and it is critical to explore these partnerships. This manuscript provides a Year 1

account of one such partnership focusing specifically on how the project has helped to bridge the theory to practice divide and strengthen university-district ties.

Leadership preparation

Preparation of school leaders has been a focal point of discussion, and debate, for at least the past 20 years (Hackmann and Wanat, 2007):

The lack of a clear understanding about what educational leadership preparation programs should be and what content, instructional methods, and structures should frame them is at the heart of this tension (LaMagdeleine *et al.*, 2009, p. 130).

Critics of leadership preparation programs argue there is little connection between theory espoused in preparation programs and the practical on the job experiences of school leaders. Portin *et al.* (2003) found in their examination of preparation programs that principal training was out of touch with the needs of building leaders and many felt “short changed” by their programs. The list of concerns about leadership preparation is lengthy and an exhaustive detailing of these is beyond the scope of this manuscript. Rather, it is crucial for us to recognize there is a call to action for improvement and immediate high-quality changes in the preparation of our school leaders (Levine, 2005; Murphy, 2005; Young *et al.*, 2002).

One area of particular focus in educational leadership preparation has been the variety of delivery modalities for the preparation programs. A “traditional” program is considered to be university-based and university faculty-led. The “traditional” “on-campus” feature of some of the university-based programs are changing to include distance learning technologies, off-site locales, and course delivery formats designed to meet the needs of “working professionals” (Grogan *et al.*, 2009; Preis *et al.*, 2007). While university-based programs are still the predominant vehicle for aspiring school leaders to be prepared, other competing training entities have emerged and are available (Grogan *et al.*, 2009). According to Crow (2006, p. 312) “[e]vidence regarding the quality of university preparation programs is scant, and most arguments resort to anecdotal evidence or have questionable methodologies”. This lack of quality control at the university level has enabled, in part, the proliferation of alternative preparation programs including school division-based leadership preparation programs, as well as not-for-profit and for-profit programs (Grogan *et al.*, 2009).

While programs outside of the traditional university-based approach are increasing in numbers and often circumventing traditional educational leadership faculty, there is a call for the continued involvement of university faculty in the preparation of school leaders (Grogan and Andrews, 2002; Young *et al.*, 2002; Sherman and Crum, 2009). Faculty members possess the research skills necessary to conduct rigorous research and connect their findings to PK-12 practice (Grogan and Andrews, 2002). University faculty can also serve as catalysts to change within districts, pushing unchallenged assumptions of leadership and bringing forth a research base to change efforts. There is a concern that district only preparation programs that exclude university personnel may simply continue to support the “status quo” within the district (Sherman, 2005). According to Sherman (2005, p. 711):

[w]ithout a connection to the academy and a more global view of leadership, the result of stand-alone efforts is often a poorly designed program that tends to support only district views of leadership.

But, the inclusion of district personnel in a collaborative process for the preparation of school leaders is critical:

Although professors can design leadership preparation programs that focus on the theoretical underpinnings of educational administration, active engagement by practicing principals who serve as mentors to prospective candidates and novice school leaders provides authenticity (Browne-Ferrigno and Muth, 2004, p. 471).

The question of authenticity and a connection to “real practice” is avoided through active involvement and collaboration of both district and university personnel. One of the original purposes of our current work, which began in 2004, was to develop a true collaborative effort, as few programs were found to have “authentic” partnerships between schools and universities (Blumenfeld *et al.*, 2000).

Successful university-district partnerships can be challenging to develop and sustain (Borthwick *et al.*, 2003). Unfortunately, there are “relatively few examples of successful partnerships” (Munoz *et al.*, 2006, p. 13) to serve as models. This lack of models for successful partnerships is due, in part, to the number of individuals involved in partnerships, as well as the clash of beliefs, ideologies, and reasons for involvement in the partnership by each of these individuals involved (Borthwick *et al.*, 2003; Munoz *et al.*, 2006). Calls for heightened accountability and increased educational quality in the 1980s resulted in numerous university-district partnerships, including the professional development school movement, with varying degrees of success (Essex, 2001). As our current state of accountability continues to increase, the demands for partnerships also continue to rise. Within the Commonwealth of Virginia, for example, the Virginia Higher Education Restructuring Act requires Institutes of Higher Education to collaborate with public schools to focus on improving student achievement.

Universities and districts must be aware of the potential pitfalls to partnerships to mitigate potential unintended negative outcomes resulting from collaboration efforts. The word partnership, in fact, can hold a variety of meanings to stakeholders and cause misunderstandings among the participants (Edens and Gilsinan, 2005). Positive results from working together are not always possible because of the variety of factors influencing the stakeholders involved (Miller and Hafner, 2008). Kirschner *et al.* (1996) have lamented that well-intended collaborative enterprises can result in failure and frustration. Part of the rationale for this is that relationships between partners are complex because of the diversity and differences of the stakeholders, unequal distributions of power between the parties, and “flawed planning, implementation, and evaluation processes” (Miller and Hafner, 2008, p. 69). Additionally, partnerships often require significant financial investment. For example, Goodnough (2004) found funding to be a major challenge of one district-university project.

A component contributing to the potential difficulties with partnerships is the inherent complexities of the various organizations involved in the collaborative process (Miller, 2007). These processes are under-researched (Simmons *et al.*, 2007), but “many researchers and critics have encouraged a collaborative partnership between all stakeholders involved in principal preparation” (Simmons *et al.*, p. 545). Goodnough (2004) found that establishing initial support from the district was critical to the success of their district-university partnership. This was done in a variety of ways including meeting with principals in short intervals, recognizing and allowing time to establish learning communities, enabling a sense of buy-in with teachers, and publicly advertising project results. It was found that while there may be an overarching goal (or goals) to a project (Goodnough, 2004)

and the need for shared accountability (Simmons *et al.*, 2007), each group (i.e. teachers, university, administrators) have their own goals and those, too, must be met in order to have a successful collaborative relationship (Goodnough, 2004). According to Miller and Hafner (2008, p. 104), “mutuality of expectations does not always insinuate equality of participation”. Therefore, even when goals are in alignment, the majority of the work may be done by one partner or group as compared to being distributed equally to all involved.

Successful partnerships between districts and universities to prepare educational leaders can provide the partners a great deal of flexibility – and opportunity – for preparing the aspiring leaders (Grogan *et al.*, 2009). For example, the internship has often been a source of difficulty and stress for students in leadership programs that do not have direct ties to a district. Often the students are left to their own devices to set up internships, identify a mentor (who most likely is not trained in how to serve as a mentor), and are often delegated non-instructionally focused/more managerial tasks. Well-articulated and coordinated programs with authentic university-district collaboration can bridge that theory to practice gap and work to provide authentic, in-depth, and meaningful experiences that will allow them to be much better prepared to become school leaders.

Rural school leadership

Challenges facing schools and school leaders often manifest themselves in a contextual nature and become dependent upon the geographic and demographic settings of schools and districts. Rural areas are often characterized by environmental and climatic issues that impact their economy in unique ways leaving large-scale unemployment, a lack of job opportunities, and a low emphasis on the value of education (Starr and White, 2008; Salazar, 2007; Browne-Ferrigno and Allen, 2006; Bauch, 2000). Additionally, rural schools can be characterized as transient; and ethnically, culturally, and socio-economically diverse. It is constructive for researchers to examine the challenges and structures that function differently in rural school districts.

Like many rural districts, the location for this university-district partnership faces difficult financial challenges and geographic isolation. The partner district is located in the mid-Atlantic region and is arguably one of the most economically disadvantaged counties in the state. The per capita income for the county is roughly half the state average and the percentage of students receiving free and reduced price lunch is 60 percent. The division has two K-7 elementary schools and one 8-12 high school, with two of the three schools in the district accredited with warning by the state Department of Education, meaning they have not met accreditation standards. The county is a high need school district that serves 1,842 students, 1,103 of which (60 percent) are economically disadvantaged. It also has a diverse student body; with African-American students in the majority (Black, 48 percent; White, 37 percent; Hispanic, 13 percent).

Another measure of the county’s economic disadvantage is that approximately 12 percent of its 6,700 homes remain without indoor plumbing and approximately 21 percent of the families live below the poverty line. Median household income in 2007 was roughly \$34,000 compared to the state average of \$60,000. In terms of education, some 67 percent of the population are high school graduates, compared to a state average of 82 percent, and roughly 16 percent have Bachelor’s degree, nearly half the state average of 30 percent.

Resource shortages and staffing challenges

One unique challenge for rural school districts is the recruitment and retention of quality teachers and educational leaders. As schools are often far removed from areas of commerce, the hiring pool becomes limited and quality individuals are often difficult to attract (Starr and White, 2008; Salazar, 2007; Browne-Ferrigno and Allen, 2006). The partnering district is experiencing this shortage in both their pools for teaching and administrative candidates. Qualified teachers are often difficult to recruit and retain. In 2008-2009, the district employed 9 percent of teachers who did not meet the federal definition for highly qualified, in comparison to the state average of 2 percent. Additionally, the district's rate of provisionally licensed teachers was 13 percent as compared to the state average of 6 percent. Finally, only 34 percent of teachers in the district held advanced degrees in 2008-2009, as compared to the state average of 51 percent.

Instructionally focused leadership professional development needs

Rural school principals often see their most significant role as that of instructional leader, but this is the area where they feel they need the most significant professional development (Starr and White, 2008; Browne-Ferrigno and Allen, 2006; Browne-Ferrigno and Knoepfel, 2005; Graham *et al.*, 2008). Salazar's (2007) study of principals in rural areas in seven states revealed that rural principals self-identified a crucial need for professional development in building team commitment, creating learning organizations, sustaining and motivating for continuous improvement, and setting instructional direction. Generally, principals reported feeling well trained and competent in general management tasks, but not as instructional leaders (Salazar, 2007; Browne-Ferrigno and Knoepfel, 2005). The district for this partnership identified a lack of strategic thinking and planning as an area for focused improvement. A multitude of seemingly disconnected initiatives led to a sense of frustration among both teachers and district and school administrators. The planning process for the district is ongoing and includes a newly shaped vision, mission, belief statements, and goals. A shared vision and commitment to professional development directly linked to school improvement is critical for successful gains in student achievement (Townsell, 2007).

The rural school administrator must possess competency in designing professional development and evaluation/assessment practices that encourage teachers to refine their craft and engage in continuous collaboration to improve teaching for learning (Townsell, 2007; Harmon *et al.*, 2007). The partnering district is working through grants and partnerships in the areas of leadership development, mentoring, and mathematics instruction vertical articulation.

Community relations

Leaders in rural areas must be well versed in weaving together faith organizations, libraries, public parks, and other social service resource organizations. Strong community linkages and a shared leadership with community members are key characteristics of successful rural school leaders (Starr and White, 2008; Graham *et al.*, 2008). These skills must then be translated to professional development for teachers. It is crucial that teachers gain an understanding of cultural norms and ethos of the rural community in which they teach. As such, the partnering district serves as an example of such successful community partnerships. Through dual enrollment, university-district partnerships, partnerships with local organizations and businesses such as the NAACP

and local literacy councils, the district seeks to expand offerings to their students and community members.

The Futures Program (pseudonym)

The original focus of the partnership described in this paper began in 2004 and was aimed at enhancing student achievement via quality instructional practices. Over the course of the next several years, university personnel and district leaders worked on a variety of district initiatives and grant-funded projects. In 2008, the university and district jointly developed and applied for a School Leadership Program five-year grant from the United States Department of Education (US DoE). The program was one of 22 funded projects in 2008.

The Futures Program was developed based upon a critical and in-depth review of existent research and literature regarding educational leadership preparation, as well as the unique needs of the rural school district. The foundations for this program reside in the following: a program comprised of specially designed courses that meet ISLLC and state accrediting standards, as well as addresses the identified needs of the school division developed in collaboration with university faculty and school division personnel; a strong mentoring component embedded into the program; a three-semester internship that provides in-depth, authentic experiences; an action research component where each cohort member will team with teachers to increase assessment literacy specifically to embed student assessment for learning and to form data teams; specific attention to the multicultural and diversity needs of the division using a social justice framework; and on-going professional development for cohort participants and division administration. The Futures Program was also designed to address myriad concerns highlighted by critics of educational leadership preparation and to authentically bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Methodology

The Futures Program is a US DoE grant funded five-year project and is a joint endeavor between a university and rural school district. In this manuscript, we report an analysis of data from the first year of program implementation. Throughout our work, we continually emphasize the importance of authenticity and the context of practice. Given the immense scholarship in teaching, learning, and leadership and the well-documented lack of application of theory into practice (Browne-Ferrigno and Muth, 2004; Cochran-Smith, 2005; English, 2006; Murphy, 2005; Neville *et al.*, 2005; Smith, 2003), our emerging approach has been to seek out research methods that are more authentically linked to practice than most conventional methodologies allow (Schoenfeld, 2004).

Importance of authentic approaches to research

In our work, we have emphasized the importance of research designs that:

- are more authentically linked to practice;
- help bridge the gap between theory and practice; and
- better utilize empirically rooted teaching and leadership theory with fidelity.

What is particularly needed in the current educational climate are research designs that help bridge the gap between theory and practice and help practicing educators utilize

empirically rooted teaching and leadership theory with greater fidelity. Lagemann (2002) has described this as “useable knowledge” and to these ends we utilize a research design that makes practice itself the site of research (Schoenfeld, 2004). As Grogan and Andrews (2002) point out, the strength of university scholars working with public schools is their ability to conduct rigorous research and then transfer this knowledge to practice, and this has been central to our partnership goals. We would take this a step further arguing for research efforts that are fully integrated into practice, making the strength of university scholars their ability to integrate research and practice into purposeful efforts that produce useable knowledge.

In this research, we investigate how creating more authentic and contextually relevant university-school partnerships and embedding leadership preparation in the context of practice may help build stronger bridges between theory and practice. More specifically we ask:

RQ1. How does embedding leadership preparation in the context of practice help build stronger bridges between theory and practice?

RQ2. How does creating more authentic contextually relevant university-school partnerships help build stronger bridges between theory and practice?

Design-based research methods

Our research draws from the design-based research paradigm as it is well matched to our goals. Design-based methods not only produce new theory, but iteratively use new knowledge to improve program implementation with both theory and practical educational interventions as its outcomes (Edelson, 2002). Design-based methods were developed to test and refine educational programs based on theoretical principles, collecting formative data for continuous program improvements (Collins *et al.*, 2004). Utilizing design-based principles, we:

- collaboratively developed the Futures Program with the school division;
- set pragmatic goals for the program, with data collection designed to inform our progress towards those goals;
- created proximal assessment “waypoints” to assess data and make suggestions for program improvements; and
- measured the more summative effectiveness and produce scholarship for wider dissemination.

Data collection

Data collected in Year 1 for this research study included a number of qualitative sources. These included the Leadership Performance Planning Worksheet (LPPW) for new school leaders, key informant interviews, document analysis of ongoing correspondence between stakeholders and cohort members’ work products (plans for various leadership responsibilities), field notes from meetings and training activities, and researcher field notes from researcher debriefing sessions. Data used for this project were collected during Year 1 of the grant funded effort, with the goal of repeating this process during the successive four years to further mine the data for continued program improvement. Our primary analytic lens for interpreting these data was the four pillars for successful

university-school partnerships (Myran *et al.*, 2011). We utilized a data collection matrix (Appendix 1) to categorize and analyze our data.

The LPPW is a tool designed to help aspiring and new leaders “identify, organize and effectively lead instructional improvement in their schools” (New York City Leadership Academy). The reflective tool iteratively assesses 40 leadership behaviors which fall into nine dimensions that were derived from a synthesis of principal leadership protocols used across the country. These leadership dimensions are personal behaviors, resilience, communication and the context of learning, focus on student performance, learning, supervision of instructional and non-instructional staff, management, and technology. The worksheet is used in conjunction with mentor/mentee relationships to explore strengths and weakness of the aspiring leaders and set professional development goals for the future.

Key informant interviews were set up with individuals involved in the Futures Program at various levels. These included mentors and mentees, central office administrators and school administrators. Interviews were conducted informally throughout the first year and involved a total of eight interviews. Additionally, documents, correspondence, and cohort members work products were collected and organized by categories and maintained by the research team. Lastly, the research team maintained field notes from meetings and training activities, and researcher debriefing sessions.

Data analysis

In previous work, we identified four key pillars to effective university-school partnerships. Examining data from interviews, field notes and document analysis, we identified these pillars with a primary focus on how partnerships can best address the central mission of quality instruction to improve student learning and instructionally focused leadership which better supports teacher quality. As we critically reflected on the various experiences with the university-district partnership through the lens of teacher quality and instructionally focused leadership, four key pillars necessary for successful partnerships emerged. We identified these four as being able to help build the internal professional capacity of schools to improve and sustain changes to create new and more productive normative structures. The four pillars, which we use in this paper as an analytical lens to view our findings are:

- (1) the need to take a developmental view and recognize that new practices take time to develop and transfer to generalizable teaching and leadership practices;
- (2) the need to find a balance between theory and practice;
- (3) the need to develop clear shared goals and maintain an effective communication system; and
- (4) the need to develop and support the instructionally focused leadership practices required to shepherd in a new normative structure.

An overview of the pillars are provided in Appendix 2 (Myran *et al.*, 2011).

Findings and implications for practice

The purpose of this study was to better understand:

- how embedded leadership preparation in the context of practice helps build stronger bridges between theory and practice; and

- how creating more authentic contextually relevant university-school partnerships help build stronger bridges between theory and practice.

A critical review of the existent data from Year 1 of the Futures Program project through the lens of the four pillars revealed valuable insights into the university-school partnership. Using a constant comparison (Strauss, 1987) approach, we developed initial categories and refined and strengthened these through several iterations. Our findings are categorized into the following themes: holistic approach to leadership preparation, develop relationships, meaningful professional development, realism in design and experiences, and a process of introspection. Implications for practice are tied directly into the reporting out of the findings.

Holistic approach to leadership preparation

One of the primary objectives in the design of the Futures Program project was to overcome the traditional approach to educational leadership preparation where courses are taught in isolation from one another often with no connection to authentic practice (Portin *et al.*, 2003). The overarching theme of bridging the theory to practice divide was a driving force in the design. Intent of design does not always translate into operation, but the Year 1 data collected and examined in our analysis provides support that this was accomplished.

The course sequence was designed specifically to provide an integrative approach to the preparation program, enabling a developmental view and approach to their leadership studies and application of course material. This has allowed the Futures Program to counter charges of preparation programs that they are “out of touch” with the PK-12 schools (Levine, 2005; Murphy, 2005; Young *et al.*, 2002). The first semester (spring) introduced students to the field of educational leadership, as well as school law. Students spoke to their ability to recognize how law impacts their roles as educators in the field, both in their current positions as well as future principals. Evidence from the data indicates that the cohort members were able to see the interrelationships among the courses they are currently taking as well as draw in the courses from the previous semesters. According to one student:

Instead of the material being compartmentalized and thus maybe repeated in different classes, the data and the supervision and the curriculum are all parts of a whole, and we are seeing how they are all interrelated.

As Dwyer *et al.* (1987) have pointed out, what distinguishes effective principals from ineffective principals is their ability to ascribe meaning to their work, their ability to see relationships between the daily routine and non-routine activities and their personal values, beliefs and vision in their ability to connect the undifferentiated jumble to their overarching perspective of schooling. Observations indicate that cohort members are establishing a solid foundation for this important set of skills and are able to make the link between theory and practice. For example, during the second semester, three courses were taught in an integrative manner: curriculum development and assessment, instructional supervision and assessment, and data-based decision making. We found the integration of these three classes this past summer helpful in connecting theoretical ideas to practices. Since classes are often taught in discrete units, integrating them helped show how leadership theories and practices cross-coursework. According to one student “I can see the entire portrait in school leadership both managerial as well

as instructional aspect already”. In an evaluation of the Year 1 data, the grant program evaluator indicated:

They are seeing not only the links among the course, but also the links within their system and are provided the ability to make critical links between course content and real-world problem solving within their division.

As universities and districts seek to create and sustain similar partnerships for leadership development, it is important to examine the balance between theory and practice required for comprehensive programs. Students in the Futures Program indicated positive experiences that were echoed by district leadership, about the integrated course structure. This program and similar programs should seek to determine which programmatic courses provide the most benefit when taught in an integrated fashion by university faculty and district leadership, enabling programs to remain in touch with contemporary educational leadership practices (Portin *et al.*, 2003). This allows for continuous reflection on the part of students about the manner in which the theory espoused correlates to actual practice. Embedded leadership development should be considered not only in university-district partnerships, but in traditional programs through embedded hours and internship experiences. Additionally, it provides students with the needed holistic view of leadership required to successfully lead schools focused on instructional change and improvement.

Develop relationships

Darling-Hammond *et al.* (2007) found that exemplary school leadership preparation programs are ones where positive relationships exist between universities and school districts. “The programs we studied were distinguished by the willingness of central actors in both districts and universities to facilitate cross-sector collaborations” (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2007, p. 16). As evidenced in the literature, university-school partnerships are critical to the success and efficacy of the preparation programs (Grogan *et al.*, 2009).

Development of positive relationships does not stop with the university and current district leadership. All district personnel must be able to engage in fruitful dialogue, professional development, and other activities in order to make the partnership effective. Successful school leaders are able to develop and cultivate positive relationships (Crum and Sherman, 2008; Leithwood *et al.*, 2006):

Districts committed to school improvement realize that, more than anything, successful improvement efforts depend on an effective “people strategy” that recruits, develops and retains strong leaders, leadership teams and teachers (SREB, 2001, p. 40).

Strong internal district relationships between personnel are crucial. Data analysis from Year 1 revealed an emphasis on intra-district relationship development by project personnel in addition to that of the district and university focus.

Previous partnership efforts with the university and district revealed a disconnect between central office leaders, building leaders, and teaching staff. Year 1 data reveals the Futures Program project breaking down some of the previous barriers to initiatives experienced by the district. One school leader indicated “I like that we are working as a division so that we are all on the same page”. In addition, another person voiced approval at the inclusion of the aspiring leadership cohort members in district training

and initiatives. "Thanks for focus on the opportunity to share w/cohort so we are all on same page."

A major component of the Futures Program is the use of district leaders as trained mentors for the cohort members. This enables a further strengthening of the university-district-internal district personnel relationship. Mentoring not only has benefits for the mentees in terms of support, feedback, and encouragement, but also enables the mentees the opportunities to experience professional growth, personal growth, and reflection (Ehrich *et al.*, 2004). Training sessions between university personnel and current leaders allow the development of positive relationships at that district-university level. Mentors and their mentees are paired through a matching process and then are required to meet in a face-to-face manner a minimum of once a month, with three additional contacts during the month (i.e. e-mail, phone conversation). The data reveal that mentors and mentees are dialoguing much more often than the required minimum and the mentors are provided critical networking opportunities for their mentees. Some of the mentors have brought their mentees to external district meetings, involved them with district initiatives not linked to the cohort program, and facilitated entre' into activities to strengthen their leadership skill sets.

The need for clear and shared goals that foster effective communication is evident as the development of university-district partnerships continue. As this partnership evolved, structures were established that created opportunities for consistent communication among cohort members, university faculty, and district leadership. The authentic experiences gained through university-district partnerships that foster this type of communicative relationship are dependent upon this structure. Cohort members should be given opportunities to communicate not just with district leadership, but with state, regional, and national leaders through symposiums, conferences, and organizational meetings. The contextual nature of leadership became clear and cohort members were provided opportunities through these experiences to gain understanding about the unique needs and strengths of their district. As additional partnerships are created, designers must take care to consider this aspect for successful implementation.

Meaningful professional development

Conversations with district leaders and Futures Program cohort members revealed a concern that there were too many initiatives the district had been engaged in during the past five years. According to one school leader:

XXX and I continue to reflect on the professional development piece and feel educators need to do a better job of tying professional development to teacher evaluation data and not just offer one shot deals, which is often the case.

One of the challenges of this particular project was to demonstrate how this was not another "new" initiative with the expectation that personnel would "fit" this into their school processes, in addition to their other tasks. According to Townsell (2007), it is critical for professional development activities to have a shared vision and commitment. This required a developmental view of the Futures Program, demonstrating that it is a five-year project designed in concert with district personnel to create a sustainable leadership succession plan in addition to other goals of the project and not a one-time activity. We have continually emphasized the streamlining of practices and being forward-focused so there is a concerted division focus, rather than disparate

and numerous districts initiatives (Townsell, 2007). This was echoed by one leader when she wrote “instead of looking back at what we did – let’s plan ahead and work on what we are going to be teaching.”

Initially several of the school leaders appeared apprehensive about participating in the project. Sustained, planned, and focused professional development appears to be eliminating the barriers to success in the project. Professional development associated with the project (i.e. mentor training, cohort internship projects, and cohort instructional supervision activities) are conducted in concert with current division initiatives. For example, one leader stated:

Just a quick thanks for the job that you did yesterday in our LTM (Leadership Team Meeting). You were very supportive of where the division stands in terms of assessment and stressed how new this is for all of us. Needed to hear that from someone on the outside looking in [...]
We appreciate all that you do for us as we continue to try to grow professionally.

Currently, the district is undergoing a process where four-and-a-half-week benchmark testing with real-time results and feedback are being implemented. This has caused more concern in a district that is already wary of increased initiatives. University faculty associated with the project have worked closely with central office personnel to integrate the benchmark and associated data-based decision-making skills into both the leadership preparation courses and the professional development activities. In this new phase of testing, there is a fear of an accountability use for the tests versus a formative use for the assessments. The professional development activities associated with the testing initiative have sought to overcome these fears. One leader indicated in the training that she “liked the comment ‘Using Data’ is not just using it for accountability,” providing a level a trust with the leadership participants and project personnel who provided the professional development.

One of the project performance measures is that “cohort members provide professional development to staff in collaboration with district leadership.” Data reveals this is underway and the cohort members are assisting building and central office leaders with integrated professional development with teachers throughout the district to assist with this initiative. This not only supports the Futures Program and the division, but also falls in line with the state Department of Education recommendations to “embed professional development activities into classrooms; (and) use data to drive instructional practices.” An argument of many aspiring leadership programs is the students are required to conduct activities that often have no relevance to the needs of the district and are out of touch (Portin *et al.*, 2003). These professional development activities eliminate that concern and provide students with the opportunity to bridge the theory to practice divide while focusing on instructionally relevant leadership practices.

By embedding leadership preparation into the needed initiatives of the district, cohort members come to understand the most effective manner to implement meaningful professional development into their current district in a way that will be applicable to future schools they may lead. Future and existing partnerships should examine ways to include cohort members and students into ongoing and developing professional development initiatives. Doing so provides additional assistance to already overburdened district leaders, while also providing the needed bridge from theory to practice for students. For example, cohort members can be tasked with conducting professional development experiences that translate into instructional improvement. That improvement can be monitored and tracked through instructional supervision

and data analysis. These activities do not serve as one-shot assignments for a course, but rather as a piece of an overarching vision for the district.

Realism in design and experiences

Objective two of the Futures Program is “to model and evaluate a program of leadership preparation that enables school administrators to learn and use research-based educational strategies to guide and direct instruction.” Aspiring leadership students who do not engage in meaningful and contextually relevant activities will not be able to bridge the theory to practice gap when working in the actual leadership field. “The workplace allows for the integration of theory and experience and provides bountiful opportunities for the application of new knowledge to authentic problems of practice” (Sherman and Crum, 2009, p. 63). Too often sitting principals state they learned how to be a principal “in the field” during their actual job, rather than during their leadership studies. This project has sought to take a developmental approach to leadership preparation and provide those experiences which will solidly prepare students to serve effectively as school leaders.

One school leader wrote:

They (Futures Program cohort members) are seeing not only the links among the course, but also the links within their system and provides the ability to make critical links between course content and real-world problem solving within their division.

Authentic experiences provide realistic views and understandings of the requirements, challenges, and rewards of educational leadership positions (Browne-Ferrigno and Muth, 2004; Sherman and Crum, 2009). The Futures Program appears to provide a mechanism for students to understand in a clinical setting the time management and prioritizing aspects to quality leadership. According to the program status report: “They (students) state they are seeing the ‘bigger picture’ and are able to make decisions that impact the division at a systemic level.” One student further wrote:

Through my experiences w/Futures Program, I have grown professionally through readings, discussions, projects, etc. These experiences have helped me understand more in depth the diversity that educators see in the classroom and what the future will bring to public school settings.

It appears the pairing of within-district mentors and the cohort members has added an additional layer of realism in design and experiences. One mentor recounted how she was able to connect a finance class activity with what was occurring in the district and the state: “We discussed her finance class briefly. I was able to provide her with a copy of the sup’s memo from Friday which gave the new composite index for NCPS.” Other mentors, through their monthly journals, have shared how they have provided further experiences to their mentees based on the current class activities via processes such as attending external division activities, participating in division training, and providing professional development to teachers based on the current preparation topic.

Students in university-district partnership leadership development programs should be provided with trained, quality mentors to allow for continued communication about the reality of school leadership (Browne-Ferrigno and Muth, 2004; Daresh, 2004; Ehrich *et al.*, 2004). This exchange provides an opportunity for both the mentor and mentee to gain valuable information. The mentee comes to understand the requirements of the leadership positions they aspire to hold and the mentor is reminded

of theory in a reflective manner that the constraints of their position may not always accommodate. When stakeholders are encouraged to participate in meaningful and practical discussions about how to engage in school and district improvement, the effects have the potential to reach students.

A process of introspection

It appears that introspection is occurring at a macro-level within the district and university, as well as at a micro-level within individual program participants. At a district level, there has been an emerging recognition by school-level people for the need for strategic planning and to move beyond the short sighted, test-driven planning that has been typical of the last number of years. At the same time, university faculty who are recognizing the need to narrow the gap between research and practice have focused their scholarship on research that addresses best practice in school leadership, classroom assessment practices, data-based decision making, school-university partnerships and other practice centered areas. It is evident the partnership represents a blend of both parties' interests, reflecting the call for partnerships in leadership preparation (Grogan *et al.*, 2009). The conversations that occur between practitioners and grant staff indicates the opportunity to bring to bear the resources of the university to the needs of the school division in more purposeful ways than the previous climate between the university and area public schools would allow.

Prior to this project in the district, there had been no long-term, strategic planning effort on the part of the school system for over five years. Project personnel are now working in concert with division leadership to lay the foundation for an on-going strategic planning process. The foundations for this revolve around a comprehensive evaluation of the numerous district initiatives that have been undertaken (and often not completed or followed through). This is being done by cohort members and project personnel and endorsed by the superintendent. The heart of this process stems from the cohort initiatives current being undertaken and other Futures Program projects. During one training session a participant listed as a concerns that:

[...] teachers not feeling this (use of data to make decisions) is worthwhile – but change takes time – student improvement takes time. Hope = the reflection/collaboration that comes from these activities are so powerful for teacher + student learning. With time the teachers will see the benefit of these activities discussed today.

This statement not only represents a developmental view of the long-term benefits of professional development activities currently being employed, but the recognition that a process of long-term introspection is necessary to recognize the benefits of current initiatives.

At the individual level, cohort members have been using the LPPW. This tool requires users to assess their current leadership competencies using 40 core leadership behaviors (for more information on the LPPW see: www.nyleadershipacademy.org/knowledge/lppw). According to the Futures Program performance report: use of the LPPW has been beneficial in providing guidance to the participants in terms of what they should be learning and how they should be growing as leaders. It also provided a vehicle for the mentors and mentees to begin their relationship and to follow the mentees' progress. The tool has proven to be a key introspective reflective tool utilized in all leadership courses and in the internship design for individual students.

Conversations with cohort mentors reveal the tool, while not required to be completed by mentors, has been utilized by most as a vehicle for their own introspective evaluation of leadership competencies.

Mechanisms for introspection and metacognition are critical to partnership success. Students in educational leadership programs are often asked to reflect upon practices and actions of the leaders they observe. A missing component, however, is the follow up reflection on the part of that leader and the debriefing of the views of these experiences. These types of shared communication experiences afford all stakeholders the ability to engage in continuous improvement through reflective practices. Those developing and improving such partnerships should make use of mentor/mentee reflective journals and required communication meetings both as a group and as individual pairs.

Challenges and lessons learned

Themes which emerged from the data collection were largely positive in nature, however, there are myriad challenges and lessons learned during Year 1 that will provide formative and substantive change to the ongoing program, as well as provide lessons for future university-school district partnerships. These concerns and criticism were consistent across interviews, surveys, research field notes, and researcher debriefings and fell into a number of categories including, concerns about mentoring, concerns about the internships, and limited time resources. The primary concerns revolved around a tension between the need to build leadership and instructional capacity to effect deep and lasting improvement and the need to keep pace with the omnipresent pressures around accountability and state testing.

Qualitative analysis identified a consistent theme that ran across all forms of data that we called “The Trap of Standardized Testing”. Because the demands and outside pressures to meet benchmark and yearly accountability standards are so intense, building administrators tended to stay focused on the immediate concerns of test preparation and underemphasized the need to make investments in building capacity and to improve strategic planning, communication and follow-through. This dominant theme draws attention to the significant tension around immediate testing and accountability pressures and building capacity for improvement. One cohort member articulated that:

I know the building administrators are concerned with teachers being out of the building and the impact this has on instruction, however, the face to face time (in internship activities and professional development) has been the most valuable.

Another cohort member expressed that it was difficult to be a core content teacher:

Unfortunately it is a narrow ledge that I have walked between bettering myself into an effective school leader and being a teacher of a tested area. They are very hesitant to allow me out of the classroom to participate in activities that could better me.

The criticisms and concerns raised about mentoring, internships, and time resources are all closely related to “The Trap of Standardized Testing”. The specific concerns raised about mentoring include a lack of mentoring time, buy in, and follow through. Some cohort members expressed that the quality of the mentor/mentee experience was unequal and that some participants began to feel burned out and lost interest. Similarly, cohort members expressed fear about self-advocating and worried about potential political fallout for being assertive or proactive in their roles as cohort members.

Some expressed that there was a sense among some mentors that cohort members were having an easier time of it than they did in their graduate work in school leadership. Communication issues between mentors and mentees were also identified as a barrier to effective mentee/mentor effectiveness.

Several stakeholders identified time management as the most significant obstacle to a meaningful mentoring and internship experience. One of the dominant concerns over time had to do with cohort members being able to fulfill their internship hours embedded in the daily work of the schools. Some of the cohort members are core content area teachers and there is a tremendous amount of pressure on them around the mandated testing for state standards. Building administrators have been reluctant to release these teachers from their classrooms to participate in grant-related activities. One of the cohort members expressed that “There is never enough time to implement practices consistently and properly.” Closely related to the expressed concerns about time were concerns about the internship activities. Cohort members discussed varying degrees of internship quality, difficulty in being released from their classroom duties even through the grant provide substitute money, competing responsibilities, uncertainty by some administrators about what the interns should be doing, and a feeling of frustration over a lack of external or administrative coordination of the internship experiences.

Conclusion

Evidence from our data indicates that holistic approaches to leadership preparation such as the integration of some courses and the infusion of context and authenticity in course work has helped cohort members see the interrelationships among the courses and develop more global views of school leadership. Developing both intra-district and university-school relationships are critical as they provide greater context and authenticity to educators’ experiences and help the division’s current leaders and cohort members make stronger links between theory and practice. Helping division personnel understand that the various partnership efforts would be more than a set of disparate initiatives, but efforts that would fit their unique needs and help build internal capacity was a critical part of partnership development. To more fully capitalize on carefully aligned and contextually meaningful professional development, the pairing of within-district mentors and the cohort members added an additional layer of realism in design and experiences. Additionally, mechanisms for introspection and metacognition and opportunities for follow up and debriefing on professional experiences creates important shared communication experiences and afford all stakeholders the ability to engage in continuous improvement through reflective practices. Lastly, seeking input about challenges and barriers to success in an ongoing way will allow formative program improvement and generalizable suggestions for similar partnership development.

While these findings are encouraging and help the research team strengthen and improve their own efforts working in collaborative leadership preparation programs, the findings are only based on the first year of data in a relatively small program. Future research should explore the issues of context and authenticity in larger projects as well as longitudinally. In addition, we noted a number of areas that need improvement which stem from a central tension we called “The Trap of Standardized Testing”. The extent to which educators felt pressure over these issues was pervasive and warrants a careful examination to better understand the particular dimensions of these challenges as well as seeking possible solutions to overcoming them.

Our analysis highlights that aspiring leadership students who do not engage in meaningful and contextually relevant activities will not be able to bridge the theory to practice gap when working in the actual leadership field. Authentic experiences provide realistic views and understandings of the requirements, challenges, and rewards of educational leadership positions. While these findings are based on the first year of a five-year project, they do suggest that context and authenticity are the keys to building bridges between theory and practice. To these ends, university-school leadership preparation partnerships should consider the degree to which their programs infuse a holistic approach to leadership preparation, foster the development of both intra-division and university-school relationships, coordinate professional development that is meaningful to the division's goals and the context of its needs, create realistic experiences, and provide ample opportunities for future leaders to reflect on and share their growing understandings of effective school leadership.

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Appendix 1

Research questions		
The four pillars	How does embedding leadership preparation in the context of practice help build stronger bridges between theory and practice?	How does creating more authentic contextually relevant university-school partnerships help build stronger bridges between theory and practice?
Take a developmental view		
The balance between theory and practice		
Develop clear shared goals and maintain an effective communication system		
Develop and support the instructionally focused leadership practices		

Table AI.

Appendix 2

Take a developmental view

Many of the initiatives developed in our various partnerships involved significant shifts in the culture of leadership, teaching, and learning. This involved much more than simply acquiring a new set of discrete skills; rather, success was dependent on establishing new institutional norms and beliefs that would support the long-term intended use of these updated skills. A developmental view of school improvement recognizes that new understanding takes time and deep engagement to develop into well-understood and generalizable teaching practices.

Finding the balance between theory and practice

Teachers often argued the university's approach was too academic with limited directly useful information. "Just give me three strategies that work!" is what we often heard from teachers. We struggled with how providing more directive, user friendly training actually risked undermining the fidelity of those teaching practices. In our view, in order to assure the high-impact use of the training, the PK-12 educators needed professional development that facilitated discretionary authority and clinical professional judgment. We were concerned that an overly pragmatic approach risked a type of mechanized teaching and leading where the focus was on procedure over developing abilities to apply practices in flexible, non-rote ways.

Shared goals and effective communication systems. Across these efforts, our school partners had numerous, and sometimes competing and/or overlapping initiatives. This lack of integration was a significant source of frustration for many teachers. Without a way to focus and prioritize one's efforts, many seemed to default to a compliance mindset where they did what they were told to do and suspended their own professional judgment. University-school partnerships have great promise, but public schools and universities are very different places and communication problems can undermine this potential. Roles, expectations, standards, schedules,

and rewards in these two settings are all very different and as such, more effective lines of communication are needed.

Develop and support the instructionally focused leadership practices

Without an instructionally focused and strategically aligned mission, partnership efforts are at serious risk of failing. Individual efforts may have merit, but if the building leaders and teachers do not understand how they fit into the larger strategic goals of the school division, this potential is not met. In the current educational climate, dominated by frequent testing and decontextualized pacing guides, we tend to focus on teaching to the test. This can take the life out of school programs and deflect teaching from its deeper purposes. Instructionally, focused leadership can help move beyond simple structural change and facilitate improvements in the instructional core and foster a more dynamic learning environment for students.

About the authors

Karen L. Sanzo is an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership at Old Dominion University. She is currently the Principal Investigator for a five-year United States Department of Education School Leadership grant. Her areas of research interest include leadership for school improvement; data-based decision making, leadership preparation, and women leaders in education. Karen L. Sanzo is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: ksanzo@odu.edu

Steve Myran is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Foundations and Leadership at Old Dominion University. Dr Steve Myran's research is focused on the areas of university-school district partnerships, formative assessment, and data-based decision making. Steve Myran's work is heavily invested in applied and design-based research principals that address both school personals pragmatic and applied needs and facilitates rigorous scholarship.

Jennifer K. Clayton, PhD, is an Assistant Professor in Educational Leadership at the George Washington University. Her main office is located at the Hampton Roads Center in Newport News, VA. Dr Jennifer K. Clayton has also served as a Visiting Assistant Professor at Old Dominion University, an adjunct in the role of supervisor of student teachers, coordinator of administrative interns, and instructor. Her K-12 experiences include work as a secondary social studies teacher and curriculum specialist. Dr Jennifer K. Clayton is a graduate of James Madison University, Rutgers University, and Old Dominion University.

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