How professional standards guide practice for school principals

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to provide an empirical measure of how principals enact prescribed leadership standards into practice. The aim of the study was to ascertain how current school principals perceive the practice of a specific set of leadership standards.

Design/methodology/approach – A total of 61 practicing school principals in North Carolina were asked to rate (in a forced distribution) how they currently enact the North Carolina Standards for School Executives (their professional standards for certification and evaluation). Using Q-methodology, factor analysis generated three model sorts. These factors are examined with the sorting data along with data from a post sort questionnaire.

Findings – The three factors that emerged in this study highlight that there is no one way leadership practices are lived in schools. Specifically, this study provided three distinct categories of how school principals practice leadership. The three factors that accounted for 38 percent of the variance in this study. The factors were named collaboration focus, policy focus, and vision focus. Each provides illustrative descriptions of what fosters and inhibits practices within each factor.

Practical implications – The findings have clear and present implications for how, why, and to what extent current school principals enact professional standards in the face of contextual factors that may complicate or even negate the efficacy of standardized practice. Such analysis holds promise that practices can be mediated in a meaningful manner.

Originality/value – This study adds value to the field by virtue of examining the dissonance between standards and practice. This study's methodology that seeks to operationalize subjectivity is original in the field of principal leadership.

Keywords Q-methodology, Principal practice, School principal standards, Leadership, Principals

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Professions have standards. In fact, one may stipulate that standards provide a line of demarcation between amateur and professional. Standards stipulate pre-service or certification credentials as well as on-going development. In many professions there is also a licensing component beyond a baccalaureate or post-Baccalaureate degree. Pre- and in-service development are finite, however professional standards are to be lived on a daily basis. The purpose of this study is to understand how professional standards are lived by current school principals in the USA. The study utilized one state's standards for school principals. We asked each principal to sort the standards in a forced distribution to better understand how they perceive the standards in their daily practice.

This paper begins with a brief overview of professional standards for school principals. We then discuss the methods for conducting an empirical study of principals' perceptions of living their professional standards in one state. Next, three factors are examined that illuminate how the standards are currently enacted in practice. Finally, we conclude with a summary of implications for school principals in particular and the espoused vs actualized enactment of professional standards in general.

2. Standards for school principals

The current high-stakes accountability efforts in education have squarely put the school leader in the crosshairs. Recent demands linked with accountability promulgated by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (specifically mandates for student achievement and imposes sanctions for "failing schools" that involve removing the school principal, and public reporting of test results) have placed new pressures and demands on a position that many considered already facing an exodus of qualified professionals (Gronn, 2002; Pounder and Crow, 2005; Pounder and Merrill, 2001). Consequently, the position of principal is more difficult and less desirable a career than ever (Educational Research Service, 2000; Fink and Brayman, 2006; Pounder and Merrill, 2001). As Fink and Brayman (2006) speculate, principals are frustrated, having been stripped of autonomy, which has produced "an increasingly rapid turnover of school leaders and an insufficient pool of capable, qualified, and prepared replacements" (pp. 62-63) (see also Beaudin *et al.*, 2002; Lindle, 2004; Olsen, 1999; Sykes and Elmore, 1988). Principals have been targeted to make immediate and fundamental changes in the management of schools. They are especially held to task on the learning gains of students.

As accountability efforts have grown, so too has the scrutiny on the preparation of school principals. Arthur Levine's (2005) *Educating School Leaders* is perhaps the most recognized report indicting educational administration and leadership preparation programs. In the report he stated, "The majority of programs range from inadequate to appalling, even at some of the country's leading universities" (p. 23). Levine highlighted a disconnection in certification programs between theoretical, in-class instruction and practical, on-the-job duties. Although Young *et al.* (2005) refute the Levine report because of poor methodology, other research has supported some of Levine's conclusions. Based on such reports and the accountability demands placed on school leaders, there has been a recent reformation of principal certification and professional standards.

2.1 Principal certification

A proliferation of new, alternative certification programs has emerged enjoying state approval for licensure. One-quarter of states now permit alternative licensure of education leaders, either autonomous from higher education or in collaboration with it (McCarthy and Forsyth, 2009). In fact, Cibulka (2009) stated "University-based leadership preparation programs no longer enjoy a near monopoly on the right to prepare school principals and other administrative leaders, and now compete with a growing number of alternative providers" (p. 1). Second, current university-based programs have restructured their programs to meet the new demands for school principals (see Militello *et al.*, 2009; National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2008; National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2002). Murphy and Orr (2009) called for programs to "address changing expectations for principal

leadership, particularly to foster school improvement and meet accountability expectations for school performance" (p. 9).

New models of administration preparation programs have focussed on pedagogy (Sykes, 2002); organizational, programmatic, and cultural features (Orr, 2008); mentoring experiences (Daresh, 2004; Matthews and Crow, 2003; Pounder and Crow, 2005); succession planning (Macmillian, 2000); and the delivery of programs (Hale and Moorman, 2003; Tucker and Codding, 2002). In addition, national and state organizations for program accreditation and candidate licensure are pressing for principal preparation program "revisioning" in order to create new standards for contemporary school leaders. Some researchers claim that education leadership as a field should reincarnate to form a subject area with "internal accountability, epistemological consistency, and a focused research agenda" (Kowalski, 2009, p. 351).

2.2 Principal professional standards
Standardization rests on a number of presuppositions, including the notion that all school contexts are basically identical and we already know everything we need to know about leading schools. These presumptions support the contention that success for schools can be realized if only we could codify a known set of leader behaviors and implement them with greater fidelity. John Dewey (1929) noted that approaching leadership or schooling in a standardized, one-size-fits-all approach would populate the institution with people who want to know "how to do things with the maximum prospect of success. Put baldly, they want recipes" (p. 15).

Nonetheless, there has been a clear and present press to create new, improved, and measureable standards for school leaders. Most notably, the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) has worked to create a new set of national standards for school leaders (see Murphy, 2003; Sanders and Simpson, 2005). In turn, states reevaluated and revisioned standards. In 2007, North Carolina followed the national trend and called for the revisioning of preparation programs for school leaders; creating and implementing a new set of administrative standards for principal candidates. North Carolina worked with an external organization to map out seven overarching standards with corresponding sub-standards. This set of standards was called the North Carolina Standards for School Executives (NCSSE). These standards are formally tied into the university and alternative principal licensure programs. Moreover, recent efforts have coupled these standards with the mandates evaluation tool for school leaders. These reforms should have codified the NCSSE standards into the daily lives of school leaders. The purpose of this study is to further examine how the canonical nature of this reform is lived by school principals.

3. Study methods
While leadership standards have been reconstituted as a result of new demands to reform education, little research has been conducted on the practices that dominate the time and energy of current school leaders or how they navigate between prescribed standards and contextual realities. We used the recently revised NCSSE and a unique methodology to provide data to shed light on these areas of interest.

3.1 Q-methodology
Q-methodology is a useful social science research tool as it provides data on subjects' perceptions of phenomena of study (Brown, 1986; McKeown and Thomas, 1988). While social science phenomena of study can be reported in highly subjective manners,

Q-methodology allows researchers to quantify this subjectivity. In Q-methodology participants (P-sample) are asked to sort a set of statements (Q-sample) in a forced distribution. Q-methodology does not require a large number of participants (Stainton Rogers, 1995). Brown (1980) stated, "All that is required are enough subjects to establish the existence of a factor for the purposes of comparing one factor with another" (p. 192).

3.1.1 Q-sample. In Q-methodology the actual statements that are used are referred to as the Q-sample. The Q-sample can be developed in two ways: first, naturally, where documents, interviews, and observations are used by researchers to create a set of representative statements and second, ready-made, where specific established statements are used verbatim. This study's Q-sample is the latter. We used the 33 descriptors from the 2008 NCSSE verbatim (see Table I).

3.1.2 P-sample. In Q-methodology the participants that are asked to sort statements is considered the person-sample or P-sample. The P-sample for this study was 61 current North Carolina school leaders, including 29 elementary, 20 middle, and 12 high school principals. Participants were equally split in regard to gender (31 male, 30 female), and with a majority 78 percent Caucasian and 22 percent African American. Totally, 47 of the participants reported at least a Master's degree level of education.

3.1.3 Q-sort. The participants were asked to sort the 33 NCSSE descriptors (printed on business size cards) on a continuum from least representative (-4) to most representative ($+4$) of their practice as a school leader. The participants were asked to place only a pre-determined number of cards under each column heading. In the end, all 33 cards would be placed in a structure represented in Figure 1.

After the participants completed the sort, they were asked a set of prompts including describe why you placed certain statements in the ±4 columns; what fosters or inhibits you from enacting certain standards in your practice; what statements did you have most difficulty placing? Why?

3.1.4 Analysis. Data were analyzed in two phases. First, the data were analyzed using MQMethod 2.06 software (Schmolck and Atkinson, 1997). In keeping with common practice in Q-methodology, principle component analysis was used to find associations (a correlations matrix) among different Q-sorts (Brown, 1986, 1993). These initial factors were then rotated to simple structure with the varimax method. In this study three factors were rotated as there was a clear "elbow" in the scree plot of eigenvalues. Model sorts or factor arrays emerged, each representing a sub-set of the participants. Each model array generated a z-score for each statement to determine placement. Additionally, participants on each model array determined significance levels. As previously mentioned, significance levels were determined by the total number of descriptors sorted (unlike the number of participants as in traditional R-methodology). For this study the level of significance was 0.44 ($1/n$ (33) $\times$ 2.58).

In the second phase of data analysis, individual statements were analyzed within factor and across the factor arrays. Statements displaying the greatest range between factor arrays were highlighted and analyzed as distinguishing statements (McKeown and Thomas, 1988). To name factors, we examined the model sorts as they emerged from the data. Finally, the post-sort open response data were coded for emergent themes. Specifically, coding focussed on rationale given to the statement placement by each participant (e.g. statements on either end of the continuum).

Statement	Sub-standard	Statement
1	1.A.1	Ensures that the school's identity (vision, mission, values, beliefs and goals) actually drive decisions and inform the culture of the school
2	1.A.2	Initiates changes to vision and goals based on data to improve performance, school culture and school success
3	1.B.1	Is a driving force behind major initiatives that help students acquire twenty-first century skills
4	1.B.2	Systematically challenges the status quo by leading change with potentially beneficial outcomes
5	1.C.1	Incorporates principles of continuous improvement and creative twenty-first century concepts for improvement into the school improvement plan
6	1.D.1	Encourages staff members to accept leadership responsibilities outside of the school building
7	1.D.2	Incorporates teachers and support staff into leadership and decision-making roles in the school in ways that foster the career development of participating teachers
8	2.A.1	Ensures that knowledge of teaching and learning serves as the foundation for the schools professional learning community
9	2.A.2	Encourages and challenges staff to reflect deeply on, and define, what knowledge, skills and concepts are essential to the complete educational development of students
10	2.B.1	Structures the school schedule to enable all teachers to have individual and team collaborative planning time
11	2.B.2	Systematically monitors the effect of the master schedule on collaborative planning and student achievement
12	2.B.3	Ensures that district leadership is informed of the amounts and scheduling of individual and team planning time
13	3.A.1	Establishes a collaborative work environment which promotes cohesion and cooperation among staff
14	3.A.2	Facilitates the collaborative (team) design, sharing, evaluation, and archiving of rigorous, relevant, and engaging instructional lessons that ensure students acquire essential knowledge and skills
15	3.B.1	Ensures that the school's identity and changing culture (vision, mission, values, beliefs and goals) actually drives decisions and informs the culture of the school
16	3.C.1	Utilizes recognition, reward, and advancement as a way to promote the accomplishments of the school
17	3.C.2	Utilizes recognition of failure as an opportunity to improve
18	3.D.1	Builds a sense of efficacy and empowerment among staff that results in increased capacity to accomplish substantial outcomes
19	3.D.2	Utilizes a collective sense of well-being among staff, students and parents/guardians to impact student achievement
20	4.A.1	Ensures that professional development within the school is aligned with curricular, instructional, and assessment needs, while recognizing the unique professional development needs of individual staff members
21	4.B.1	Continuously searches for staff with outstanding potential as educators and provides the best placement of both new and existing staff to fully benefit from their strengths in meeting the needs of a diverse student population

| Statement	Sub-standard	Statement
22	4.B.2	Ensures that professional development is available for staff members with potential to serve as mentors and coaches
23	4.C.1	Analyzes the results of teacher and staff evaluations holistically and utilizes the results to direct professional development opportunities in the school
24	5.A.1	Ensures the strategic allocation and equitable use of financial resources to meet instructional goals and support teacher needs
25	5.B.1	Monitors staff response to discussions about solutions to potentially discordant issues to ensure that all interests are heard and respected
26	5.B.2	Resolves conflicts to ensure the best interests of students and the school result
27	5.C.1	Ensures that all community stakeholders and educators are aware of school goals for instruction and achievement, activities used to meet these goals and progress toward meeting these goals
28	5.D.1	Systematically monitors issues around compliance with expectations, structures, rules and expectations. Utilizes staff and student input to resolve such issues
29	5.D.2	Regularly reviews the need for changes to expectations, structures, rules and expectations
30	6.A.1	Proactively develops relationships with parents/guardians and the community so as to develop good will and garner fiscal, intellectual and human resources that support specific aspects of the school's learning agenda
31	6.B.1	Interprets federal, state and district mandates for the school community so that such mandates are viewed as an opportunity for improvement within the school
32	6.B.2	Actively participates in the development of district goals and initiatives directed at improving student achievement
33	7	Creatively employs an awareness of staff's professional needs, issues and interests to build cohesion and to facilitate distributed governance and shared decision making

Table I.
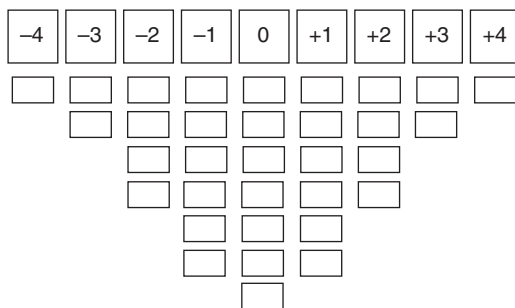
Figure 1.
Sort distribution pattern

3.2 Limitations

This relies on factor analysis that reduces individual viewpoints of subjects down to factors that represent shared ways of thinking. It should be noted that this conversion of viewpoints to factor scores might impact the study reliability.

Additionally, the Q-technique is often criticized due to the forced free distribution where the subject has to place a certain number of items in each column: "inverted quasi-normal distribution is believed to violate the principles of operant subjectivity" (McKeown and Thomas, 1988, p. 34). Finally, while the findings in this study account for 38 percent of the variance, there is a limitation in the ability to make general claims.

4. Findings

Three model sorts (Factors A-C) in this study accounting for 38 percent of the variance (cumulative 22.64 eigenvalue). In total, 48 of the 61 participants (77 percent) loaded significant on one of these three factor arrays; 13 participants sorts were not significant on any factor. Each model sort provides insight into current principals' perspectives on their practice in relationship to the current NCSSE. In this section, we describe each model sort using data from the model factor array and participant post-sort interview data.

4.1 Factor A – collaboration focus

Totally, 24 of the participants (38 percent) significantly loaded on Factor A. This factor accounted for 16 percent of the variance (9.48 eigenvalue). Figure 2 provides a visual representation of this model sort. This factor array is characterized with the school executive standards that highlight aspects of collaboration, empowerment, and facilitation. In fact, all of the standards sorted in the $+3$ and $+4$ columns have these words as primary descriptors or verbs in them:

Statement 18 ($+4$): "Builds a sense of efficacy and empowerment among staff that results in increased capacity to accomplish substantial outcomes."
Statement 13 ($+3$): "Establishes a collaborative work environment which promotes cohesion and cooperation among staff."
Statement 14 ($+3$): "Facilitates the collaborative (team) design, sharing, evaluation, and archiving of rigorous, relevant, and engaging instructional lessons that ensure students acquire essential knowledge and skills."
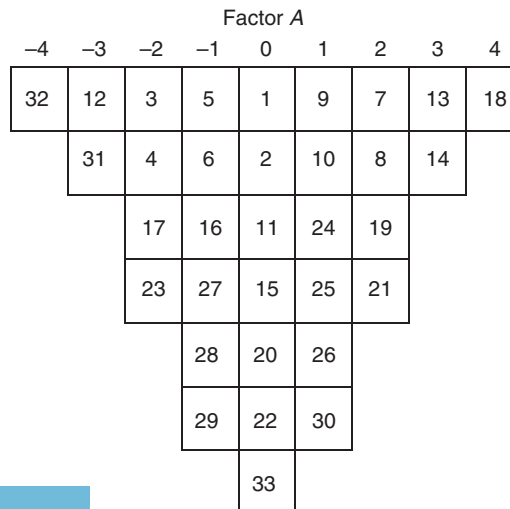

Figure 2.
Factor A –
collaboration focus

Factor A

−4	−3	−2	−1	0	1	2	3	4
32	12	3	5	1	9	7	13	18
	31	4	6	2	10	8	14	
		17	16	11	24	19		
		23	27	15	25	21		
			28	20	26			
			29	22	30			
				33				

One principal noted, "In my internship […] I had the opportunity to work with an administrator who encouraged and facilitated her staff members to get involved and have a say in what was going on in the school."

Additionally, all of the statements in the $+2$ column (7, 8, 19, and 21) have a thematic commonality of fostering collaborative knowledge and practice. One participant stated that collaboration involves not only the care and feeding associated with creating a climate, but also hiring and retaining teachers capable of collaborative work. This principal noted their high placement of Statement 21 (searching for outstanding staff):

That is the foundation. I spend more time during this than I probably do anything else. I can interview fifteen people before I find my right person, because if I make a good decision, it makes my job easier. If I make a bad selection and end up with a teacher that is not a good teacher, then I'll spend a lot of time trying to get that person where he needs to be or be spinning my wheels […] So, I'm looking for sharp people that are going to give their best in the classroom but extend themselves beyond too. This is the most important thing any administrator does. You get two or three bad teachers and you spend your entire year mentoring and trying to get them in place. You spend your time dealing with phone calls and disgruntled parents. You find yourself with no potential for leadership. My entire summer I interview and interview.

Another principal reflected on Statement 7 (fosters teacher leadership development), "My philosophy is to have a whole group discussion, a whole group understanding of what we are doing and why we are doing it; [it's] not necessary to have a dictator-type leadership style, but to involve teachers, to get them involved, and to model good leadership."

Interestingly, distributed and collaborative leadership also marks the negative side of this factor array. However, here there is a lack of collaboration associated with goals, planning, and policy at the federal, state, and district levels:

Statement 32 (-4): "Actively participates in the development of district goals and initiatives directed at by improving student achievement.' In the -3 column, Factor A reported concourse statements."
Statement 31 (-3): "Interprets federal, state and district mandates for the school community so that such mandates are viewed as an opportunity for improvement within the school."
Statement 12 (-3): "Ensures that district leadership is informed of the amounts and scheduling of individual and team planning time."

A principal commented on Statement 31, "I hate this one because it is so ever-changing. It's aggravating. There are some good points to these federal regulations and policies, but they change so often it's frustrating." Another participant reflected that for Statement 32:

I feel that what typically happens is that the school board dictates or gives goals to the district and those goals are trickled down and dictated to individual schools […] As a principal, I am heavily involved in implementing district goals and initiatives, but I am rarely, if ever, involved in the development of these goals.

Collaboration is undoubtedly an anchor of this factor. However, the principals in this study practice collaboration differently inside and outside their schools.

4.2 Factor B – policy focus

In total, 13 participants (21 percent) significantly loaded on Factor B. This factor accounted for 12 percent of the variance (7.32 eigenvalue). The executive standards

that loaded high in the distribution is this factor represent an adherence to policy and initiatives handed down to schools:

Statement 12 ($+4$): "Ensures that district leadership is informed of the amounts and scheduling of individual and team planning time."
Statement 32 ($+3$): "Actively participates in the development of district goals and initiatives directed at by improving student achievement."
Statement 31 ($+2$): "Interprets federal, state and district mandates for the school community so that such mandates are viewed as an opportunity for improvement within the school." (Figure 3)

These statements focus on district and school-level compliance with current policies and procedures. A principal commented on Statement 31:

I think with Title I, I am doing a lot more of that than I initially thought. When I first read the card, I thought it was the mandates we hear when we have our law updates annually and some of the new laws that have come down in our particular district, but now I'm thinking more in the line of No Child Left Behind and things like that. So I moved it to a high spot on the sort.

Additionally, a number of statements centered on the development of twenty-first century skills (Statements 3 and 5) were ranked high in the distribution of this array ($+2$ and $+1$, respectively).

The left side of the distribution further supports a myopic, policy driven conceptualization of leadership. Of the six statements in the -4, -3, and -2 columns five represent a lack of collaboration and vision to accomplish school goals. Leadership in this factor is practiced by policies that are handed down and not by developing a vision in general (school identity (No. 1, -2)) and specifically establishing a vision of change (initiates changes to vision (No. 1, -4), challenging the status quo (No. 4, -3), and vision of change (No. 15, -3)). Moreover, collaboration (e.g. Statements 13 and 18 both -2) was placed low in this factor array. A principal stated, "To me, the biggest mistake you can make is trying to make friends with your staff too early. I know I have said that building relationships with your staff is most important, but at first you really
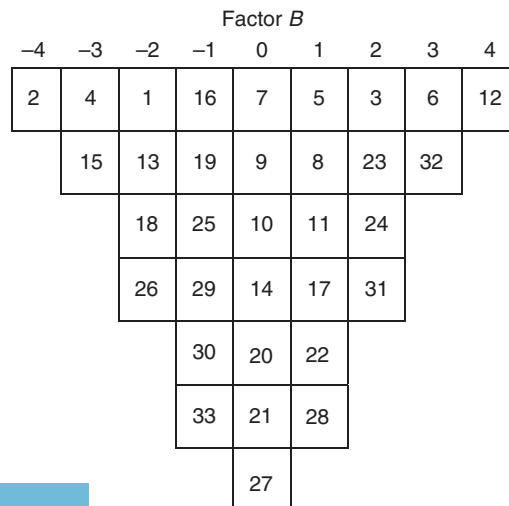
Factor B

−4	−3	−2	−1	0	1	2	3	4
2	4	1	16	7	5	3	6	12
	15	13	19	9	8	23	32	
		18	25	10	11	24		
		26	29	14	17	31		
			30	20	22			
			33	21	28			
				27				

Figure 3.
Factor B – policy focus

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have to hold back some." Another principal summarized his reflection of this model array:

My number one priority is order because that is critical to the teaching and learning process. So most of the things you see in this positive category deal with ways to establish, maintain, and keep order. And I do not mean an obsessive notion about what order is, but I am talking about the smooth operation something that where people feel safe and comfortable, the environment and the climate. So most of those things if you look at them, have to do with maintaining order which will lead to an empowered group including teachers and students which will result in the ability of everybody to, I know it is corny, but to realize their potential because I think that is what we do in this building. We are trying to get people to reach their human potential and really sometimes the job is to release it. Well, I can't release it by telling them what to do. I have to release it by creating an environment by which it can be released day to day, if that makes sense.

4.3 Factor C – vision focus
In all, 11 participants (18 percent) significantly loaded on Factor C. This factor accounted for 10 percent of the variance (5.84 eigenvalue). This factor characterized leadership practices by the establishment and enactment of a vision for student achievement:

Statement 1 (+4): "Ensures that the school's identity (vision, mission, values, beliefs and goals) actually drive decisions and inform the culture of the school."
Statement 15 (+3): "Ensures that the school's identity and changing culture (vision, mission, values, beliefs and goals) actually drives decisions and informs the culture of the school."
Statement 2 (+2): "Initiates changes to vision and goals based on data to improve performance, school culture and school success." (Figure 4)

One principal stated, "If you haven't worked toward you mission that day, then you haven't done anything."

Factor *C*

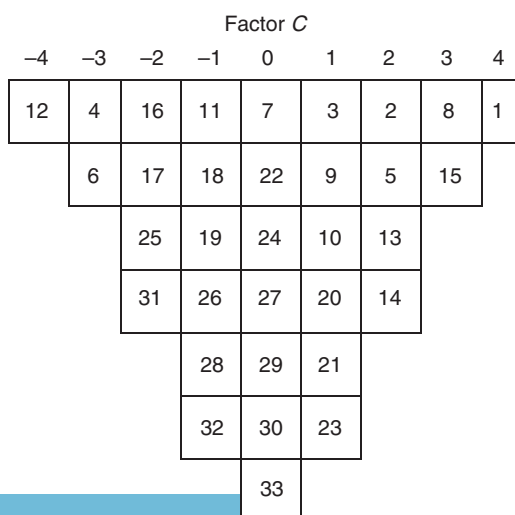| −4	−3	−2	−1	0	1	2	3	4
12	4	16	11	7	3	2	8	1
	6	17	18	22	9	5	15	
		25	19	24	10	13		
		31	26	27	20	14		
			28	29	21			
			32	30	23			
				33				

Figure 4.
Factor C – visions focus

Additionally, this factor exemplifies best practices as they relate to teaching and learning practices. A number of statements that ranked high in the array centered on facilitating teaching and learning practices including: collaboration rooted in teaching and learning and school improvement planning (No. 8 (+3), No. 14 (+2), and No. 5 (+2)), challenging staff to reflect on their practice (No. 9 (+1)), and using evaluations for professional development (No. 23 (+1)).

4.4 Cross factor array insights
Analysis across factors generated a number of statements that were statistically significant. Significantly similar statements across factors are considered consensus statements and significantly different statements are considered distinguishing. Table II highlights these statements. The consensus statements provide a powerful array of low ranked statements that are held in high esteem, at least by way of hyperbole, by educational reform proponents. Most interestingly, is the consensus placement of Statements 4 and 16 across all three factors. In all three arrays "Challenging the status quo" ranked low. Similarly, recognition of accomplishments ranked low across the arrays. Additional consensus statements (9, 20, 27) reside in the middle of the distribution. What is interesting, if not ironic, is the fact that the push to adhere to standards may in fact lead to less risk and creativity often associated to "challenging the status quo."

Statistically significant differentiating concourse statements define what exemplifies unique practice among the factor arrays. Not surprising, Statement 18 is a distinguishing statement for Factor A (Collaboration Focus) (see Table III). However, what is surprising is the notion that this statement ranks on the negative side of the distribution for Factors A and B. Collaboration has been long regarded as an essential leadership principle, regardless of educational reform ideology. The statement that had the strongest distinction among the three factors was Statement 12. These "Policy Focussed" participants clearly believed that a communication to central office for specific meeting times was important, even if other practitioners view this as somewhat picayune. Finally, Statements 1 and 2 demonstrate the importance of

No.	Concourse statement	Factor		
		A	B	C
4	Systematically challenges the status quo by leading change with potentially beneficial outcomes	−2	−3	−3
9	Encourages and challenges staff to reflect deeply on, and define, what knowledge, skills and concepts are essential to the complete educational development of students	1	0	1
16	Utilizes recognition, reward, and advancement as a way to promote the accomplishments of the school	−1	−1	−2
20	Ensures that professional development within the school is aligned with curricular, instructional, and assessment needs, while recognizing the unique professional development needs of individual staff members	0	0	1
27	Ensures that all community stakeholders and educators are aware of school goals for instruction and achievement, activities used to meet these goals, and progress toward meeting these goals	−1	0	0

Table II.
Consensus statements

No.	Statement	Factor A	B	C
18	Builds a sense of efficacy and empowerment among staff that results in increased capacity to accomplish substantial outcomes	4	−2	−1
2	Initiates changes to vision and goals based on data to improve performance, school culture and school success	0	−4	2
12	Ensures that district leadership is informed of the amounts and scheduling of individual and team planning time	−3	4	−4
1	Ensures that the school's identity (vision, mission, values, beliefs and goals) actually drive decisions and inform the culture of the school	0	−2	4

Table III.
Distinguishing statements

a school identity/vision statement for participants that define Factor C (Vision Focus). Not only are these principals' focussed on the development and establishment of vision, but other study participants are not.

5. Discussion
Research over the past decade indicates that school principal leadership is a primary determining factor in school effectiveness, second only to the role of a student's classroom teacher (Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Leithwood *et al.*, 2005; Leithwood and Wahlstrom, 2008; Robinson *et al.*, 2008). The principal's capacity to facilitate conditions for student learning, manage the organization, and build community partnerships is paramount to reaching essential school outcomes. In part this is because a school principal is well positioned to re-shape a school's culture (Deal and Peterson, 1998).

The three factors that emerged in this study highlight that there is no one way leadership practices are lived in schools. Specifically, this study provided three distinct categories of how school principals practice leadership. For the principals in the study who loaded significantly on Factor A (Collaboration Focus), professional collaboration was prominent in their work. Collaboration is the *sine qua non* of effective management. This is not a new style of management. However, elements of collaboration remain in the infancy stages of education. The development of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) dominate the landscape of educational reform and paid improvement services. While there are descriptions of leadership practice that are becoming more distributed in nature (Halverson, 2003; Spillane, 2006), there are also signs that the more standardization and regulation most often leads to hierarchical leadership (Rowan, 1990; Spillane *et al.*, 2002). Principals on this factor demonstrate constraint. That is, they have not allowed policy to push their leadership away from a collaborative approach.

Principals in Factor B (Policy Focus) were focussed on the established rules and regulations. Like constitutional "originalists" these principals see their function to implement federal, state, and district policy. Recent research indicates that in fact school leaders are responding to new high-stake polices by tightly coupling the organization. Spillane *et al.* (2011) found that leader's responses to policy include influencing organizational routines that strike at the technical core of schooling – instruction. This indicates the power and prowess of policy in this era of accountability. No longer can policy be buffered by end-users (Cyert and March, 1963) or interpreted idiosyncratically by leaders (Baier *et al.*, 1988; Lipsky and Weatherly, 1977). Factor B demonstrates the infiltration of policy into practice.

Factor C principals (Vision Focus) echoed a recent call for vision building in educational leadership. It should be noted that standards are not necessarily routines, but rather guideline for traits or features of work. In this light, the development of a school vision that is established and enacted provides a way for school leaders to move practice in a particular direction.

5.1 Implications

5.1.1 Implications for practice. The factor arrays that emerged in this study provide perspective on how principal standards are (and are not) lived in daily practice. One way to change practices is to change the professional standards that are supposed to guide practice. In North Carolina, like other states, standards were re-drafted in an effort to clearly signal exemplary leadership practices. However, we have learned that policy and implementation are mutually exclusive. The saying "what is mandated gets done" may not be entirely true. An overreliance on standardization may not be best suited for a uniquely humanistic organization, like schools. These results seem to provide confirmation of the tension felt by practicing principals between enacting one-size-fits-all standards and the realities of the demands place on them in actual practice.

Breaking into the black box on one's practice is difficult to be sure. Practices are fraught with knowledge, skills, and beliefs. Policy wonks often believe that only mandated changes in practices will change beliefs. Others, especially in pre-service preparation programs, work through an apprenticeship model of practice. The answer to changes practice lies in the murky middle – between the overreliance of strict standards and the incongruence of idiosyncratic practices.

5.1.2 Implications for research and policy. Many reviews of leadership remain didactic. Here leadership is viewed as either transformative (e.g. inclusive and collaborative leading to meaningful and sustained change) or transactional (e.g. hierarchical for efficient and expedient change). However, understanding the subtle nuances of leadership is a more complex task. As such, leadership and change requires an understanding of psychology (i.e. individual processing), sociology (i.e. group dynamics), and even anthropology (i.e. context of cultural setting). There are examples of leadership literature that take these aspects into account. For example, researchers Marzano *et al.* (2005) conducted an extensive meta-analysis of leadership practices that effect student achievement. While 21 practices were identified, seven had powerful effect on what they called second-order change. The North Carolina School Executive Standards incorporate a number of these seven practices. However, a number of these practices fall on the negative side of the model factor array, in all three factors. For instance, "challenging the status quo" factored low for all of the study's participants. Moreover, the 2005 findings indicated that school principals must have a deep knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment as well as an "intellectual" focus.

What does this mean for the North Carolina School Executive Standards? To begin, professional standards in general tend to be garbage can models that promulgate every set of leadership skills and political ideology of the day. However, there are more personal examinations that include specific context of one's setting and one's ideals and beliefs on education. Indeed it can be said that practice is not yet caught up to the standards. It can also be submitted that standards have not yet fulfilled the need for practice. That is to say, this is yet another example of how the alignment of policy and practice cannot be mediated by new standards alone, even if mandated. To truly

change practice policy mandates must strike beyond accountability measures and enter the murky world of the psychology, sociology, and anthropology of one's beliefs, relationships, and setting.

6. Summary

Standards are often developed in a thoughtful and meaningful manner. Yet how standards are utilized in practice is difficult to ascertain in an a priori fashion. As a result, studies that seek to understand how standards are lived in one's practice are vital. Based on the impact of school principals and the new accountability/standards movement, this investigation of how school principals perceive their professional standards in their practice is timely and important. Our findings that indicate principals are focussed on "collaboration" or "vision" vs those focussed on "policy" reinforces a leadership dichotomy previously discussed. That is, leadership is too often viewed in a dichotomous manner – either transactional or transformational. This research elucidates that the newly devised standards emphasizes leadership that edifies either transactional or transformational leadership. We submit that framing leadership in such a binary manner is highly problematic.

We conclude with a summary of our major implication: The North Carolina standards provide an important tool that establishes (A) a language for principal practice and (B) a basis for talking about their practice – what foster or inhibits elements of the standards to be actualized. Findings in this study provide empirical evidence or an accounting of how (A) and (B) above frame practice in three foci: collaborative, policy, and vision. Are these the effects of accountability or policy or standards? There is uncertainty to this question. However, one thing is certain, practice remains a private enterprise. Studies like this may provide a glimpse into the impact of professional standard on the daily work of school leadership.

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