Perspectives of school leaders on the administrative internship

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study was to identify how current K-12 district and school leaders who are alumni of an educational administration program describe how they acquired the essential skills and experiences needed to be effective in the leadership positions.

Design/methodology/approach – For this qualitative study, the authors interviewed program alumni of one university leadership preparation program regarding the experiences and training they identified as having prepared them with the necessary skills, knowledge, and attitudes to be successful in their positions, as well as which components of their administrative internship experiences, if any, they identified as having most prepared them for their positions.

Findings – School and district administrators indicated they acquired the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to become successful leaders through specific preparation experiences and opportunities. Key experiences cited by alumni included gaining some leadership responsibilities while they were teachers and further opportunities to lead in the administrative internship; engaging in practical, hands-on assignments in their graduate degree program courses; learning from other administrators with unique areas of work responsibilities, as well as from other schools and districts; and receiving guidance from a dedicated mentor.

Originality/value – The findings from this study contribute to research in the area of administrator preparation by guiding preparation programs in prioritizing the types of training and practicum experiences that aspiring K-12 educational leaders receive as a component of their preparation programs.

Keywords School leadership, Educational administration, School administration, Internship, Principals, Principal preparation

Paper type Research paper

It is no longer questioned that the school leader has a significant influence on both what and how students learn. From their review of available evidence, Leithwood *et al.* (2004) determined that classroom instruction is the only school-related factor that has a greater impact on student learning than the school leader. As school administrators begin to retire in large numbers, it is imperative that educational leadership programs assist in creating a qualified pool of applicants filled with trained professionals who know how to envision and implement the necessary functions of a school (Bottoms and O'Neill, 2001).

A key component of educational leadership and preparation programs in the USA is the administrative internship, an experience in which aspiring school leaders assume roles at school sites to gain hands-on leadership experience. Despite the crucial nature of this phase of preparation for educational leaders, there is much disparity both between and within states as to the requirements, implementation, and evaluation of the internship experience for students. Further, Fry *et al.* (2005) criticized internship programs for a lack of active and direct leadership opportunities, stating that current internships focus mostly on passive and observational activities.

Research suggests that full-time administrative practicums, in which aspiring educational leaders are relieved of classroom responsibilities and mentored by an expert principal, are most likely to provide interns with the leadership experiences they need (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2007; Lovely, 2004; Norris *et al.*, 2002; Fry *et al.*, 2005; Wallace, 2010). While full-time administrative internships may offer the best preparatory experiences for aspiring leaders, most students require a salary, and there is a lack of funding to support this type of full-time internship for all aspiring leaders. In light of these circumstances, it is critical to prioritize the identification of essential skills and experiences that aspiring administrators must gain during the internship experience.

The purpose of this study was to identify how current US elementary and secondary district and school leaders who are alumni of a university educational administration preparation program describe how they acquired the essential skills and experiences needed to be effective in leadership positions. With this knowledge from current administrators, educational administration programs can design internship experiences specifically targeted to prepare students with the skills and experiences needed to be effective school and district leaders. The research questions for the study included:

(1) What experiences and training do current educational administrators identify as having prepared them with the necessary skills, knowledge, and attitudes to be successful in their positions?

(2) Which components of their administrative internship experiences, if any, do current educational administrators identify as having most prepared them for their positions?

School leadership development
It is clear that the effects of successful (and, conversely, underperforming) principals can be both direct and indirect on teaching and student achievement; more importantly, these effects are likely to be greatest in underperforming schools (Leithwood *et al.*, 2004). Yet, the role of the contemporary school leader is wrought with complexity characterized by concurrent and, sometimes, competing roles and priorities. Principals are expected to be instructional leaders, regularly observing classroom teachers, providing constructive feedback, and serving as the curriculum expert, as a few examples (Wahlstrom and Louis, 2008); however, principals often still serve as the facilities manager, the budget manager, and the disciplinarian, particularly in an era of tight fiscal constraints in which the position of the assistant principal is frequently being cut (Davis *et al.*, 2005). Other researchers acknowledge that "effective leadership is intensely interpersonal" (Dinham, 2005, p. 340), raising to prominence the important role principals hold in establishing relationships built on collaboration, commitment, and trust.

Furthermore, the current era of accountability mandates and state testing has caused both researchers and practitioners to suggest that leadership preparation programs must include features not necessary a decade ago and must continually evolve to meet new needs. Elmore (2005) indicates that performance-based accountability measures, through which schools are evaluated, rewarded, and/or sanctioned based on student performance, have greatly impacted the demands placed on school leaders. Related to this new expectation, Schmidt (2010) argues that effective preparation

programs should include a discussion of leaders' emotions so they will not later be emotionally overwhelmed by the current culture of American schooling described by Elmore.

This diverse array of leadership responsibilities, unique to the principalship, can distract leaders from their most important role of providing quality instruction (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2007). Hallinger (2011) suggests that leadership that focusses on improving school outcomes, described as leadership for learning, is influenced by personal values, beliefs, knowledge, and experiences, leading to variation in leadership practice. Therefore, in order for school leaders to be prepared to contribute to school improvement and student learning, leadership preparation programs must focus on preparing them with essential skills, knowledge, and attitudes.

Leadership preparation programs

Leadership preparation programs that aim to provide aspiring administrators with all the necessary skills for the principalship also struggle to ensure that aspiring leaders acquire each of the needed competencies to fulfill their future roles. Preparation programs commonly emphasize legal issues, finance, and management, but many fail to focus on preparing instructional leaders who can utilize leadership to improve school performance (National Staff Development Council, 2000). Schmidt (2010) ponders whether university-based leadership preparation programs are capable of preparing aspiring administrators for the new and diversified principal role required in twenty-first century schools.

Internationally, such as in much of Africa, as well as in more developed nations such as England, formal leadership preparation programs are still in an emergent state (Bush and Jackson, 2002). Moller and Schratz (2008) found that England and Scotland were the only European nations to require specific pre-service training for school leaders. The sense that strong teachers can transition easily into the principalship or school headship, however, has led to the recognition of many new school leaders being underprepared and overwhelmed (Bush and Jackson, 2002). It is clear that in order to manage the wide range of duties assigned to the principal, all leadership preparation programs must provide principals with myriad skills, knowledge, and attitudes needed in the position prior to assuming this role (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2007).

Early research identified initial characteristics of effective leadership preparation programs. Leithwood *et al.* (1995) found that effective programs include authentic, practice-based experiences; stimulate "situated cognition"; and contribute to the development of participants' problem-solving skills. Programs identified as fostering these qualities included internships, cohort groups, mentor relations, and problem-based learning activities. In similarity, Clarke and Wildy (2010) suggest that leadership preparation must involve engaging prospective leaders in a range of experiences and challenges, such as through action learning, to foster aspiring leaders' abilities to develop solutions to real work problems. Essentially, for aspiring principals to be prepared to be successful instructional leaders, they must have the opportunity to engage in and learn from effective instruction in leadership preparation programs. LaPointe and Davis (2006) further indicate that exemplary leadership programs focus on instructional leadership by seeking "to develop the ability to coach and support teachers, to share a vision for reform, and to lead a team to implement that vision for improved teaching and learning" (p. 4).

Some initial consensus now builds upon earlier findings by further clarifying the key elements of the characteristics of principal preparation programs. In their school

leadership study, Darling-Hammond's (2007) team concluded that effective leadership preparation programs incorporate these specific elements:

- clear focus and values about leadership and learning;
- standards-based curriculum that focusses on instructional leadership, organizational development, and change management;
- field-based administrative internships coupled with skilled supervision;
- cohort groups that allow for collaboration and teamwork in hands-on, practice-based situations;
- instructional strategies that link theory and practice;
- a thorough recruitment and selection process for candidates and faculty; and
- strong school-district partnerships (p. 63).

In examining the common characteristics of exemplary leadership preparation programs, Darling-Hammond *et al.* (2007) highlight the strong links between theory and internship experiences as critical components of these programs, as will be explored in the forthcoming section.

Internships, practica, and experiential learning for aspiring leaders
In the USA and internationally, research consistently finds that principal preparation is undergoing change. University programs and policymakers are currently working to define the role of school principals and to determine the most effective mode of preparation (Huber, 2008). The most practical and experiential component of many leadership preparation programs are the embedded practicum hours, otherwise referred to as the internship experience. This experience, however, has been reported to vary widely across and even within leadership preparation programs around the USA, both in regards to logistical issues such as duration and location, as well as in substantive issues such as formalized reflection and activities (Barnett *et al.*, 2009; Carr *et al.*, 2003; Orr, 2011). Additionally, in some states and internationally, internships are not a requirement of preparation and development programs.

Status of internship
Internship experiences vary across programs with regard to required numbers of hours, the sustained nature of those hours, the activities conducted within the internship, and the protocols for reflection and university faculty visitation utilized across programs. Some programs emphasize leadership and management skills while others focus on cultivating a deep understanding of instruction (Davis *et al.*, 2005). These differences in program requirements are also representative of differences in the required number of internship hours that individual US states indicate must be met for administrative certification to be granted (Barnett *et al.*, 2009). Even across the four states in which alumni of this particular university-based preparation program often seek administrative positions, there is wide variance in licensure and administrative internship requirements, as shown in Table I.

Such variance in internship requirements is evident internationally as well. In Ontario, participants complete a 60-hour internship at their own schools, and in Singapore, participants take part in two four-week internships at their schools that alternate with seminars (Huber, 2008). In both development programs, participants observe or shadow their school leader, carry out a project independently, and visit other

State	Requirements for licensure	Requirements for internship
Virginia	Master's degree 3 years teaching experience Completed an approved program in administration and supervision from a regionally accredited college or university Meet requirement of SLLA Qualifying Score	320 clock hours of deliberately structured and supervised internship experience (elementary, middle, high, central office, and agency placements) with diverse student populations Internship must be focussed on instructional leadership and learning for all students
Maryland	Master's degree 27 months of satisfactory teaching performance Department-approved program which leads to certification as a supervisor of instruction, assistant principal, or principal that includes the outcomes of MD instructional leadership framework 18 hours of graduate course work Meet requirement of SLLA Qualifying Score	A practicum, internship, or a collaboratively designed and supervised experience by the local school system and university
District of Columbia	Master's degree (or Bachelor's degree combined with completion of a state-approved program in K-12 school leadership/administration) 2 years of teaching or pupil services or 2 years of instructional leadership work experience Meet requirement of SLLA Qualifying Score	No internship specifically required
North Carolina	Completion of an approved program in educational administration at the Master's level or above Meet requirement of SLLA Qualifying Score	No internship specifically required

Table I.
Summary of state requirements

schools to broaden their understanding. Many other countries may not have formal internships as part of a preparation program, but rather view the preparation of school leaders as a process that begins with early identification of leadership potential in teachers (Schleicher, 2012). Once this identification occurs, teachers are provided opportunities to serve on committees or in quasi-administrative positions as department heads or grade-level leads. Singapore, Finland, and Norway, for example, focus on this type of early development. Additionally, some countries such as Denmark and the Netherlands have developed courses or seminars that allow interested school leaders to engage in reflective and practical activities to assess their own value, as well as provide their local agencies the opportunity to screen them. They are then eligible for more intensive training programs (Schleicher, 2012).

Some consistency exists among US preparation programs accredited by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, as these programs must demonstrate their adherence to the Educational Leaders Constituent Council (ELCC) preparation standards (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2011). The ELCC standards require that leadership candidates complete sustained field-based

experiences, but even the revised standards allow for significant variation in internship requirements and actual internship hours completed among programs. The ELCC Revised Standards state that candidates must complete a six-month, full-time internship of 9-12 hours per week that could be fulfilled through two three-month internship experiences, one four-month internship and two months of field experiences, or another combination of sustained experiences (Educational Leadership Constituent Council, 2009).

Despite the evidence that adults learn best when they experience the opportunity to gain new skills and employ problem-solving strategies in these types of authentic learning environments, in reviewing 61 educational administration preparation programs, Fry *et al.* (2005) found that current programs provide interns with more opportunities to observe or participate in school-based leadership experiences than to lead. Only a few internship programs prepare students developmentally for leadership by requiring them to first observe, then participate, and finally lead school reform efforts (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2007). Even more alarming, Fry *et al.* (2005) state, "Fewer than one-fourth [of programs] require aspiring principals to lead activities that implement good instructional practices" (p. 5).

Murphy (1990) pointed to the part-time delivery structure and evening classes incorporated into administrative preparation programs as indicators of these types of low expectations and below-standard program content. Indeed, in their research, Darling-Hammond *et al.* (2007) found that robust internships rated highly by graduates were full-time, year-long, paid experiences in which interns are mentored by a full-time certified administrator. These internship characteristics shaped the experiences of aspiring administrators in the Delta State University program and in San Diego's Educational Leadership Development Academy (ELDA), as two examples.

Variation is also apparent in the role of the mentor, coach, or site supervisor. Therefore, the inclusion of district personnel in a collaborative process for the preparation of school leaders is critical. Browne-Ferrigno and Muth (2004) state, "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" (p. 471). The criticism often voiced of a lack of authenticity and connection to "real practice" is avoided through active involvement and collaboration of both district and university personnel.

Impact of internship experience
Although there is certainly variance in terms of the depth and breadth of internship experiences, administrative interns do find value in their experiences (Dunaway *et al.*, 2010; Orr, 2011). Evidence suggests that the internship gives aspiring school leaders the opportunity to problem solve and to attend to the daily challenges faced by those currently serving in administrative positions. Huber (2008) indicated the benefit of internships is found in the synthesis of coursework and practical experiences in real schools. He also suggested the need for internships to include seminars and journaling as a way to ensure tight coordination between reflection and internship experiences. Leithwood *et al.* (1996) learned that graduates of administrative preparation programs found their internships to be valuable as a result of the opportunity this experience provided to problem solve and to integrate theory and practice. This study also found that a high-quality, formal, leadership preparation program accounted for about 8 percent of the variation in leader effectiveness (Leithwood *et al.*, 1996).

Orr and Orphanos (2011) later specifically identified the impact of internship experiences in stating, "[…] the higher the quality of programs and internship experiences, the more positive the effects on candidate learning and subsequent use of effective leadership practices" (p. 48). Orr (2011) further showed that an intention to enter into the principalship was positively associated with the intern's rating of internship quality. However, further research is needed as Orr and Orphanos (2011) have conducted one of the few studies attempting to link the long-term impact of the administrative internship specifically on future principal effectiveness. Additionally, literature that does seek to examine the long-term impact of internship experiences is often hampered by the inability of program graduates to disentangle their internship experiences from other experiences such as informal leadership opportunities, division professional development, and on-the-job learning experiences.

Researchers are working to understand internship program features that are most likely to prepare effective future leaders as they move into practice (Milstein, 1993; Milstein and Krueger, 1993; Orr, 2011). Specifically, Krueger and Milstein identified six core components necessary for program graduates to carry their experiential learning placements forward into leadership roles, including: time on task, mentor assignment and training, varied placements, opportunities for formalized reflection, supervision in the field, and coordination by the university program. Darling-Hammond *et al.* (2007) articulate that exemplary preparation programs integrate real-world practice with theoretically based reflection processes, thereby emphasizing the primacy of experience in the process of learning, as articulated by David Kolb (1984). At Delta State University, for example, experiences from student internships are utilized in the classroom for problem-based learning and case method conversations, thereby furthering students' day-to-day experiences as new administrators in reflective conversations. San Diego's ELDA program also uses similar strategies to link experiential learning with relevant theories, and Bank Street's Principals' Institute links coursework (including action research) to a progression of field-based experiences and a final intensive internship. These approaches prepare aspiring administrators to apply professional readings to experiences in practice throughout their leadership careers (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2007).

As universities continue to work toward the development of quality internship experiences for aspiring leaders, it is important to understand that ongoing revision will be needed as the world of schooling is ever changing. This study sought to hear the voice of current school leaders who completed an internship as part of one university-based leadership preparation program.

Theoretical framework
In the preparation of educational administrators, as well as in business, health, and numerous other professions, internships and field placements are an essential component of learning and development, playing an important role in the curricula of undergraduate and professional programs. Experiential learning theory, as articulated by David Kolb (1984), prioritizes the role of one's experience in the process of learning. The theory posits that learning is a process in which concepts are developed and modified by one's experience over time, thereby identifying learning as a lifelong process. Hord (2009) similarly indicates that "Learning is not an add-on to the role of the professional" (p. 40), further explaining that learning is both an active and reflective process that relies on a constructivist theory of learning. As such, knowledge is created and recreated by the learner (Kolb and Kolb, 2005).

Hickcox (1991) ascertained that the underlying basis of Kolb's experiential learning theory is adult learning theory and development. According to adult learning theory, adults are most interested in subjects that have immediate relevance to their current jobs and lives. As a result, learning must be an "on-the-job phenomenon" so that it can occur in the location where action can be taken (O'Neil, 1995, p. 20). Classroom learning is therefore best enhanced by the context of work experience, as Kolb (1984) articulates:

> [Experiential learning theory] offers a system of competencies for describing job demands and corresponding educational objectives and emphasizes the critical linkages that can be developed between the classroom and the "real world" with experiential learning methods. It pictures the workplace as a learning environment that can enhance and supplement formal education and can foster personal development through meaningful work and career-development opportunities (p. 4).

Internships and field placements can thereby serve as a means through which the workplace, in turn, becomes a learning environment, allowing personal knowledge to be created and recreated while bridging the worlds of theory and practice together (Kolb and Kolb, 2005).

In considering Kolb's experiential learning model as an analytical tool for career exploration, Atkinson and Murrell (1988) explain how experiential learning ties an exploration of self with an exploration of the world of work. Work experience, they indicate, leads to personal development while progressing through the learning cycle. This process of acquiring new knowledge, skills, and attitudes, Kolb (1984) describes, requires four abilities: concrete experience abilities, reflective observation abilities, abstract conceptualization abilities, and active experimentation abilities. In essence, concrete experiences lead to reflections, based on which new implications for action are determined, and then these implications are actively tested as they guide new experiences (Kolb and Kolb, 2005). This study specifically sought to link the first two of these parts of the learning process by asking current administrators to identify concrete learning experiences in which they conceived of knowledge, skills, and attitudes in preparation for their current roles and to use these experiences as the basis for their reflections.

Specifically, through the interviews conducted, administrators were asked to reflect on and distinguish between various concrete training and development opportunities in which they had participated in order to link their acquisition of specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes with certain experiences. By engaging participants in this reflective process, the researchers hoped to determine the types and content of experiential learning in which aspiring school leaders must participate in order to become effective K-12 school administrators.

Methods, data sources, and study site
As a component of this study, the researchers interviewed current K-12 school and district leaders who graduated from the same university administrative preparation program within an 11-year period. This preparation program requires that aspiring leaders enrolled in the university's Master's and Education Specialist degree programs or in the Certificate program complete two internship experiences, the first being 80 hours in length and the second being 150 hours in length. Most students in the program complete at least one of these internships on a part-time basis in their own school settings. In the first 80-hour internship, students are expected to initiate and lead an administrative project under the guidance of a site-based mentor and the university supervisor. The second 150-hour internship is usually completed during

the summer semester, during which time students are expected to take on the role of a full-time administrator in completing a multitude of tasks ranging from hiring, budgeting, and supervising teachers to leading curriculum development, data analysis, and school improvement initiatives. Due to budget cuts by school districts over the last few years, some students in this program do not have the benefit of completing their second internship in a school with a summer school session, thereby limiting the leadership experience that can be attained.

At the initiation of this study, more than 500 alumni of the program were contacted via an e-mail invitation and asked to participate in the study if they met the requirement of currently working as a K-12 principal, assistant principal, or central office administrator. Sixteen alumni who met the criteria for participation responded to the initial e-mail request and were included in the study, after which additional requests for participation were made and three more alumni responded to this request. Given that we asked potential participants to self-select for inclusion in the study only if they were in a current administrative role, our sample was small. Additionally, working with student data systems to track alumni can prove challenging given the frequent changes to e-mail addresses experienced with job mobility. Still, the 16 alumni who did initially respond, and the three additional alumni who responded following a second request, represented a nice cross-section of the varied roles held in school administration.

Alumni who agreed to participate in the study were then scheduled for in-person or phone interview sessions. Nineteen interviews were conducted and each semi-structured interview lasted for approximately 45-60 minutes. Demographic information was also gathered during the interview process. Nine alumni who participated in the interviews are current school principals, four are currently assistant principals, and six are central office administrators. Additionally, administrators employed at the elementary, middle, and high school levels were all included in the study. Administrators who participated are currently employed in four states, 15 of whom work in urban, suburban, and rural districts in one state. Twelve females and seven males participated in the study, and the years of experience in education of those who participated ranged from seven to 25.

A semi-structured interview protocol was used to inquire about the experiences and training that alumni believed prepared them to become effective school and district administrators. After the recordings from each interview session were transcribed, the researchers independently coded interview responses using AtlasTI software, paying particular attention to themes that emerged and to instances in which codes overlapped. Initial categories were developed according to specific skills and knowledge that alumni indicated were essential in their current positions, experiences that were recommended for aspiring leaders, factors that influenced the internship experience, and training that prepared these current administrators for the most practical aspects of their current positions. The researchers ensured validity by coding and recoding each transcript to account for all emergent themes.

Findings

Findings from this ongoing study revealed several important themes that will be described and categorized under each research question. Alumni of this university's leadership degree and certificate programs were very willing to reflect and share experiences, both in regards to the preparation they received as aspiring administrators and their current roles as school leaders. While educational leaders

in a variety of roles (including principals, assistant principals, and central office administrators) participated in the study, no major differences in responses from alumni in various roles emerged, with the exception of their descriptions of daily responsibilities.

Acquisition of skills, knowledge, and attitudes
In order to become successful school principals, aspiring administrators must be prepared with the necessary skills, knowledge, and attitudes to assume their future roles. In conversations with current administrators, alumni were asked to describe their current job responsibilities and then to provide connections, if any existed, to preparatory experiences (either formal or informal) that prepared them to assume these tasks. Two primary themes emerged from these conversations as general sources of administrators' skills, knowledge, and attitudes:

  · leadership opportunities pursued by alumni while they were teachers; and

  · practical, hands-on assignments completed in their graduate degree program courses.

In order to understand fully how administrators were prepared to be successful in their positions, it is important to first consider how they describe their current job responsibilities and the requisite skills for success in their positions. In interviews, participants had difficulty identifying the primary job responsibilities of their roles, and those tasks that they did identify ranged across position types. Central office staff described their focus on building capacity, budgeting, staffing, developing curriculum, and conducting district events, while also juggling the competing interests of other central office divisions, community members, and school-based personnel. Principals and assistant principals reported different job priorities than those of central office staff, such as managing discipline, maintaining student safety, ensuring quality instructional practice, coordinating testing, focussing on student achievement, and leading curriculum. The school-based administrators also discussed a need to focus on teacher satisfaction as an essential component of quality instructional delivery.

While administrators described a wide range of job requirements and tasks, there was general consensus on the level of challenge faced by those who pursue administration. In alignment with Elmore's (2005) acknowledgment of the current demands placed on administrators, leaders interviewed referred to their positions as "high stress" with long working hours. This working environment was highlighted by one assistant principal who said, "I feel a little bit like a hamster on a wheel and I'm not getting very far. I'm kind of running in place it seems like. And I think I'm getting farther than I really suspect I am."

A skill highlighted by every program alumnus as critical for all leaders to acquire was the ability to engage in consistent, quality communication with all stakeholders. Communication was emphasized both in content and delivery, specifically in being able to contextually determine and utilize an appropriate communication style for various audiences and situations. For instance, one principal described the need to gain style and tact to adapt to working with parents and guardians of all backgrounds and eras. This principal strove to communicate that "I care about your child and this is what I'm going to do to help your child […]."

As is common among effective teachers, administrators were most often not able to tie a specific skill or piece of knowledge to a particular learning experience. They had difficulty disentangling their internship experiences from courses and other training

sessions in which they participated, instead speaking generally about how and where they learned the skills necessary to become administrators. Yet, overwhelmingly, alumni pointed to practical, hands-on experiences that were gained in leadership roles while they were still teachers or acquired through class projects and assignments.

First, alumni placed great emphasis on the importance of obtaining leadership opportunities as a teacher before, during, and after involvement in a formal leadership preparation program. Many described the need for an aspiring leader to be a natural go-getter, a person who would volunteer for all opportunities, as a way to increase visibility and demonstrate competency. Specifically, participants mentioned serving as a volunteer on committees, assisting with special events, participating in the PTA, working extra hours, and generally being a yes-person. One central office administrator reported, "Talk to your principal and put yourself out there because nobody wants somebody who doesn't take the initiative, who doesn't want to step outside of their comfort zone, their classroom."

Some of the alumni specifically discussed such opportunities as providing a mechanism to expand their own systemic thinking and knowledge, as well as their network of mentors and peers within the school division. According to one central office administrator:

> The most critical thing for people actually getting into a position of leadership is their physical experience prior to that internship. I was an assistant principal on a teacher pay scale for a year […] working with discipline, working with attendance, just tagging along with them, sitting in on all the admin meetings and just being a part of that team was really what helped me get in.

Additionally, several alumni cited looking for this kind of experience when hiring both assistant principals and teachers for their buildings. One principal discussed this expectation of aspiring leaders, saying, "I think just for students who are thinking that they're going to be a teacher and they're going to do this degree and their internship, and then move into an AP role – I want to see as a teacher you've done something more."

Second, alumni spoke about coursework taken during their leadership preparation program as influential on their acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Generally, participants described both positive and effective coursework experiences from which they found direct connections to their daily practice. One assistant principal explained, "It's a difficult job, but I do feel like I was prepared, that my coursework really touched on the many facets of responsibilities that you face as an assistant principal, or principal."

Several graduates commented at their own inability to remember course numbers or titles, yet they were very specific about faculty names and even specific cases or anecdotes that were shared during their coursework that had a long-term impact. One central office administrator, for example, described that he found the professors to be more important than the assignments, since he acquired learning from the experiences that they shared with the class. Alumni seemed to have a deeper memory of the practical experiences and opportunities they were afforded. Overall, alumni pointed to the practical, hands-on nature of certain course assignments having the greatest influence on their preparation as leaders. One central office administrator cited a practical group project that he completed as being very informative:

> […] We did a group project for facilities class that I thought was very well-thought out, planned, and I think was of great benefit. That one I remember very clearly. It was essentially

design a school – I think he gave us a choice whether we did an elementary or secondary school. Basically, design a school from the ground up, and be prepared with the instructional rationales for how you've allocated programming space. And make sure that you comply with the law. And you realize how big a deal it is.

Additionally, several alumni referred to class visits conducted with the internship course instructor, citing the impact that their discussions with the administrators of those buildings had on their own leadership preparation. One assistant principal reported on the benefit of these experiences:

From an elementary school, to an alternative learning school, to a high school – I mean everything. And we went in and talked to their administrators about what goes on in my building and we were able to ask questions and get feedback and interact […] that was so beneficial to me.

Such assignments focussed on practical experiences and site-based ventures were consistently reference by alumni as valuable for their future development as administrators, whether the alumni were current school-based or central office administrators.

On the other hand, a few participants highlighted the disconnect between some course assignments and their practical impact. For example, one principal reported, "There was no sense of a unified program, so it was a series of courses I took to get a degree that was going to allow me to do what I wanted," a comment that harkened back to the criticisms cited by Murphy (1990) of part-time programs. Similarly, a current principal indicated that the lack of connection between her school law class and what's actually happening in schools was not very helpful in her acquisition of necessary leadership skills. It is clear that the quality of assignments and students' experiences varied across the classes required by this university's educational administration program, and that the lack of cohesion across coursework lessened the program's impact for some graduates, highlighting the need for a standards-based, coherent curriculum that links theory and practice, as identified by Darling-Hammond *et al.* (2007) as a characteristic of effective programs.

A final trend that emerged regarding coursework was the impact of doctoral coursework on daily practice. Several interview participants enrolled in doctoral coursework at this university upon completion of their Master's, EdS, or Certificate program, and many discussed the benefit of the theoretical foundation provided to them in these courses. Some indicated that the theoretical base seemed to have been missing at the Master's program levels but was later emphasized in doctoral work. This acknowledgment was characterized by one graduate who said, "Because I've [now] done the majority of the doctoral program, I figured out that I did not quite have the theoretical base [from the other program] that I was anticipating."

Internship experiences
Current administrators interviewed for this study reflected on their internship experiences as a key component of their growth and preparation to be successful school leaders. In considering the characteristics of their own internship experiences, alumni identified three critical factors that either contributed to their own positive internship experiences or would have improved the value of their experiences. These factors included:

• the degree to which interns were provided with opportunities to lead;

- interns' exposure to new schools, districts, and areas of work responsibilities; and

- the support and trust of the site supervisor who mentored the student.

In considering how the internship prepared them to become principals, many alumni cited instances in which they were provided with hands-on experiences as being very beneficial to their preparation as school leaders. One current principal indicated that the internship, "[…] gave me an opportunity to take what we learned in the classroom to the field, and it gave me that real-world application, and it gave me an opportunity to not only hone my skills, but it also gave me the opportunity to highlight my talents to my mentor."

More than just citing the benefits of the hands-on nature of the internship experience, however, alumni referred to specific leadership experiences that they had while enrolled in the internship course in this graduate program. One assistant principal explained her experience interning at a site with an online program, "[…] Our summer school program is actually an online program. And that gave me the opportunity to learn how online courses work – how is it set up, how does it work, how are students graded? To get an understanding of that. And it was invaluable." Similarly, another assistant principal pointed to summer leadership experiences as influential on her development:

> I did a lot of hiring, a lot of the interview processing. I finished up the school improvement plan and created a more detailed – we had just gone through […] accreditation and so I took that data and I came up with a plan of, okay, this is where we're weak. How can we improve on this? I organized the freshman transition program. I started the summer school online program, which I had – I wrote a grant and used that grant money to provide transportation […] I did a lot of memo writing and organizing for the upcoming school year. I planned a leadership team retreat.

Both of these current administrators completed their internships at school sites where they had already been working. As a result, their site mentors knew them well and particularly sought to provide them with leadership opportunities. In some cases, alumni completed internships at other school locations and also had the opportunity to assume a leadership role, but this situation was less common. One current principal indicated that his mentor introduced him to another principal at a private school where he was hired to run the summer school program. At this school site, he indicated, "[…] the entire program fell under my auspice and I was fortunate enough to be handed the keys." In this case and in many others, the alumnus's mentor, the individual who encouraged him/her to pursue a degree in educational leadership, continued to support the aspiring leader's desire and need to earn varied leadership opportunities throughout the student's time in this graduate program.

There were few instances in which alumni were able to point to leadership roles that they held during the internship in which they had not already earned a degree of trust and respect from either the site supervisor in the internship or from another current school leader in the student's district or network of schools. It seems that the intern's placement at a school in which he/she already had some connections affected the degree to which the internship provided an opportunity to the student to lead.

While many alumni pointed to their opportunities to lead during the internship experience as being influential, having the opportunity to learn about areas of education outside of their own previous experience was also highlighted in interviews.

Even though, in some cases, alumni did not mention that they had the opportunity to assume specific administrative leadership roles, they suggested that having the opportunity to observe, learn from, and engage in ongoing reflective conversation with an individual mentor who had different expertise and experience than the intern proved to be powerful. For instance, one current school-based administrator spoke about her internship with an assistant superintendent at central office:

> I did a practicum at the superintendent level with an assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction. And I really think that that was a great opportunity […]. It gave me really good aspect and understanding of […] evaluation and documentation and to really kind of build on working with teachers, as far as setting professional goals for them and looking at the aspects of how you really work within learning communities and building learning communities.

Related, a principal interviewed for the study who also completed his internship in central office referred to the opportunity to observe and participate in meetings with the cluster superintendent (his mentor) as being beneficial:

> I had to go to an elementary school meet and greet and have dinner with a bunch of little kids [*Laughter*]. And then at other times, you know, I'd be sitting in her office, and she'd get a call from equity and compliance. And equity and compliance means somebody screwed up big time. It's like a dismissal of an employee […]. Taking me to meetings, going to the leadership team meetings where the top decision makers in the county were there.

The potential benefits of learning in a new school or district setting were also highlighted by one alumnus who was a current central office employee during the completion of his leadership preparation program. He suggested that he would have benefited more from the internship experience had he been placed in a county distinct and separate from his regular work environment. This alumnus did not find it necessary to work with a mentor who knew him and his abilities, but thought that learning about another district's processes and work would have contributed to his own growth. Like Milstein and Krueger (1993), this current central office administrator suggested that internships should require that aspiring leaders gain experience in a different school district so that they can see things from the "outside" and participate in varied experiences.

Finally, nearly every alumnus interviewed pointed to the important role that the site mentor plays in an intern's preparation experience. In every case in which an alumnus indicated that he/she benefited from leadership opportunities provided in the internship experience, the alumnus also cited the mentor's willingness to transfer these responsibilities to the intern because of existing trust and knowledge of the intern's knowledge and skills. To this end, one alumnus stated, "My internship was very good simply because I worked with somebody who trusts me and who let me do a lot more than I think a general person would."

Many alumni commented on the fact that their prior experiences working with their internship mentors contributed to their opportunities to both lead and learn. One assistant principal reflected on the fact that her site supervisor knew her and was therefore comfortable working collaboratively with her during the internship:

> The majority of the time, I worked in my principal's office and so I observed him to some degree but he always included me in any decision that he made. For example, there was some one-act play that he needed to approve. He was like, "Read this and let me know what you think." And so we did a lot of collaborative work and I think the reason we were able to do that was because we felt comfortable with each other.

There were some exceptions, however, to the recommendation that a successful mentor/intern relationship builds upon a prior relationship. One alumnus noted that she had a particularly open and trusting site mentor, even though they had not previously worked together:

> He asked me a few questions, he asked me how I would handle some situations and he said, "Good, go ahead. If you have any questions, if you want to run anything by me come see me. I'm here for you but I'm leaving it up to you. You clearly have the ability to do this," which was another confidence-boosting situation.

Other graduates concurred that site mentors must not only be willing to share information, but also allow the administrative intern to assume administrative leadership responsibilities. All alumni agreed that careful consideration must be given to the intern/mentor pairing in order for the internship experience to successfully prepare a student for a future leadership role.

Finally, alumni pointed to the impact of the relationship between the university and the district as influential on interns' experiences, again highlighting a key feature of effective administrative preparation programs noted by Darling-Hammond *et al.* (2007). One current central office administrator acknowledged, "Most of that [the internship experience] is gonna end up coming down to the relationship between the university and the school system where the placement's happening."

Discussion

In this study of alumni of one university leadership preparation program, current school and district administrators indicated they acquired the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to become successful leaders through specific preparation experiences and opportunities. While we recognize the limitation created by the variance in years since program completion, we still find value in looking at alumni responses from a single program. Each individual participant will vary, even across programs, based upon his/her educational work experience, professional development, mentoring, and other supports. To not study these individuals and their experiences because of this, however, would create a void in allowing educational leaders in administrative positions from highlighting and sharing their perspectives on the impact of their program and relevancy to their current position. We sought to minimize the impact of this limitation by asking graduates to reflect on coursework as a way to "transport" them back to the events surrounding their preparation program. While the interview participants had graduated from one university preparation program, the themes that emerged from the study have implications for other leadership preparation programs striving to prepare aspiring administrators with the tools needed to become successful administrators.

First, findings from this study reaffirmed existing research that pointed to the value of real-world, hands-on experiences as essential to their preparation. In agreement with the recommendation of Leithwood *et al.* (1995), current administrators indicated that authentic, practice-based experiences, both in the classroom and in the internship, were the most relevant and beneficial to their aspirant future roles. While the type of hands-on experiences that were cited ranged from stories told by current and former administrators; to case study exercises; to school site visits; to group projects that required completion of real-world, job-embedded tasks; and to the internship experiences themselves, all participants indicated that experiences that were clearly connected to their future roles as administrators contributed to their acquisition of needed knowledge, attitudes, and skills.

More importantly, the findings from this study also uncover some unique contributions with specific implications for leadership preparation programs. Participants in this study particularly highlighted the following key experiences as contributing to administrators' acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes:

- gaining some leadership responsibilities while they were teachers and having further opportunities to lead in the administrative internship; and

- learning from other administrators with unique areas of work responsibilities, as well as from other schools and districts.

First, alumni referred to opportunities they had to lead while they were still teaching as particularly influential on their development. In most instances, in discussing the experiences that prepared them to become leaders, alumni did not separate their learning in the administrative internship from learning gained through other leadership experiences. These current administrators repeatedly spoke about the importance of assuming as many opportunities to lead as possible, particularly by volunteering for additional responsibilities that were often completed outside of the work day. By the time many of these program graduates enrolled in the administrative internship, they had already engaged in sustained leadership experiences, which furthered their ability to take on full-time leadership roles during the internship. Similarly to the work of Clarke and Wildy (2010), it was clear that the hands-on experiences aspiring leaders engaged in, whether formally through preparation programs, or informally through networking and mentoring, these "real-world" experiences were key to their development. In this way, the US leadership preparation programs might consider the work of the international community (Schleicher, 2012) where teachers are given an opportunity to engage in leadership activities and then opportunities are extended to high-quality candidates as they also develop as teachers.

However, some aspiring administrators have few opportunities to assume administrative roles prior to the internship. Leadership preparation programs must therefore consider whether to admit aspiring leaders with few, or no, teacher leader experiences prior to enrollment in the program, as this lack of prior leadership experience may affect the aspirant administrator's attainment of essential knowledge and skills during the internship experience. If teachers with no prior leadership experience are accepted into administrative preparation programs, the program will need to consider the supports needed to ensure the success of aspiring administrators who have had varied degrees of leadership experience prior to the administrative internship. Leadership preparation programs may need to require that additional administrative internship hours be completed prior to program completion in this instance.

Second, current administrators referred to the need for aspiring administrators to participate in and lead varied experiences by working with different mentors in diverse settings. Even alumni who completed their internships with mentors who knew them well, and trusted them with significant amounts of leadership responsibility, indicated that they were not quite as prepared in all aspects of leadership as they might have been had they had more varied experiences. One administrator cited her lack of exposure to and preparation to deal with issues of discipline due to the lack of these challenges at her school, and another alumnus suggested that the insular nature of many districts prevents aspiring administrators from being exposed to new ideas and strategies. Another alumnus suggested that he might have learned more and gained

additional new skills if he had been encouraged to complete his administrative internship in a new district setting, rather than in his own district.

Since alumni repeatedly pointed to the powerful impact that mentors had on their pursuit of and success in a future administrative role, leadership preparation programs will need to consider how to prepare mentors to guide aspirant administrators whose experiences have previously been in a different school or district setting. In many cases, the participants in this study connected their positive internship experiences to having a mentor who specifically selected them and encouraged them to assume leadership roles. In order to ensure aspiring administrators can gain the leadership experiences necessary in the internship experience, leadership preparation programs will need to specifically prepare mentors with an understanding of internship expectations and with coaching and training to serve effectively in this role.

When asked to provide advice in designing internship programs that would effectively prepare aspiring educational administrators with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes to be successful in their future positions, participants again pointed to the impact of the two unique study findings that were described: first, the university's relationship with the mentor, and his/her willingness to provide aspiring leaders with substantial leadership (as opposed to observational) experiences; and second, aspiring administrators' pursuit of sustained leadership roles prior to assuming the position of administrator. These two key findings were highlighted by study participants both in describing their own experiences and in articulating their advice in designing internship programs, further accenting the significance of these contributions to the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes for future administrators.

Underlying each of these recommendations, the importance of the internship experience, through which aspiring administrators have the chance to apply theory to practice in daily experiences, remains paramount. The internship becomes even more critical when aspiring leaders have not had part-time leadership experiences as teachers, which alumni cited as critical to gaining skills for administration. While the value of the internship is not new from the perspective of faculty and aspiring leaders (Leithwood *et al.*, 1995; Orr and Orphanos, 2011), it is clear that additional development is necessary to fully maximize this important component of leadership preparation for all students, regardless of funding opportunities.

Implications for research, policy, and practice
It is the researchers' intent that the findings from this study will be used by leadership preparation programs to prioritize the types of training and practicum experiences that aspiring K-12 educational leaders receive as a component of their preparation programs. In order to specify next steps, implications resulting from this study have been divided into the categories of research, policy, and practice.

Research
The themes that emerged from interviews of alumni from one graduate degree program in this study warrant additional consideration and investigation. While alumni pointed to the need for aspiring administrators to have leadership experiences while in teacher roles, additional research is needed to identify how much leadership experience, and what type of experience, is needed prior to enrolling in a leadership preparation program and in the administrative internship specifically. Further research is also needed to gain greater understanding of how best to prepare mentors

to effectively support leadership development in aspiring administrators during the internship experience.

Additionally, national, regional, and local stakeholders are increasing expectations of accountability for leadership preparation programs. While administrator performance is now being tied directly to summative student achievement results, it is important for researchers to consider how impact is and can be measured. Long-term research studies that track aspiring leaders upon their entrance into a university leadership preparation program and through their first years as an administrator would provide new insights to programs seeking to tailor their requirements to best prepare administrators for their future roles. This study provided a glimpse into qualitative data that can be used to measure the impact of leadership preparation programs. Researchers must continue to work to create models for study, both quantitative and qualitative, that can allow for this type of reflection on the part of program graduates. This effort will lead to an ability to respond to critics with concrete data and research, as well as to provide a system of ongoing and cyclical program improvement informed by the nexus of research, theory, and practice.

Policy
Discrepancies currently exist in state requirements, in the availability of funding for full-time internship opportunities, and in the quality of intern experiences across preparation programs. However, current elementary and secondary administrators articulate that the internship can be a key component of administrator training programs when aspiring leaders are provided with sufficient support and opportunity to lead. University administrator training programs should aim to expand the program hours dedicated to on-site training experiences to provide extended learning opportunities and experiences for aspiring leaders, while also tailoring practicum experiences to meet the needs of students with varied prior leadership experiences. Aspiring leaders who have had fewer prior leadership experiences as teachers might be required to complete more or different practicum experiences than those who have already served as department chairs, grade-level leaders, or full-time administrators.

Additionally, alumni who participated in this study emphasized the importance of practicum experiences in which they had the opportunity to lead, participate, and observe. Particularly for the purpose of acquiring experiences in new settings, alumni highlighted the benefits of having the opportunity to observe and reflect with an administrative mentor who has job responsibilities different from his/her own prior experience. Policy changes may be needed to ensure that aspiring leaders complete observational, participatory, and leadership practicum hours in a variety of contexts and settings.

Practice
In developing effective leadership preparation programs and in ensuring the value of internship experiences particularly, alumni pointed to the need for qualified and supportive site mentors. Universities might best prepare aspiring leaders by developing partnerships with nearby school districts and jointly identifying site mentors who are both willing to provide leadership opportunities to administrative interns and able to participate in training sessions to prepare them for this responsibility. While most districts assign a mentor to new teachers, and this mentor must complete a training program to qualify as a mentor, administrative mentors for aspiring leaders still, in most cases, are permitted to assume this role with no

knowledge of the qualities of an effective mentor and no training specific to this role. In some cases, the mentor may not even be aware of the preparation program's requirements regarding the types and content of leadership experiences that the aspiring administrator must obtain. There are several mentoring training programs available, such as New York City Leadership Academy and Southern Regional Education Board, in addition to those developed and delivered by university faculty. These formal opportunities coupled with communication and seminars from the university and jointly delivered to interns and mentors are critical to maximizing the mentoring relationship.

Finally, since the findings from this study further emphasize the importance of sustained, practice-based internship experiences in preparing aspiring school leaders, the need for full-time administrative preparation experiences cannot be overlooked. University and district partnerships are growing in number, often funded through private foundations such as the Wallace Foundation or through federal dollars distributed by Federal School Leadership Program grants. Increasingly, university-district collaborations are at the forefront of research and practice; in 2010, the University Council for Education Administration 2010 even dedicated its conference theme to this topic: "Building bridges: politics, partnerships, and the purpose of schooling." As a result, the opportunity to evaluate internship components that hold promising practices for more traditional campus-based programs emerges (Wallace Foundation, 2010; Jackson and Kelley, 2002). This collaborative approach to join the best in research from university faculty, and the best in practice from school division leadership, with the support of funding for full-time administrative practicums or graduate assistantships, is where the future must lie and where additional resources must be delegated.

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