Riding the wave of administrator accountability: a portfolio approach

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to describe a qualitative study of a four-year, state-wide portfolio evaluation system for new principals. The State of Ohio (USA) was one of five states that participated in a field test of the Portfolio Assessment for School Leaders designed by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) and the Educational Testing Service (ETS).

Design/methodology/approach – The central research question was: Does the Portfolio Assessment for School Leaders process benefit or burden the practice of school leaders? The participants were a subset of the 70 principals who completed the portfolio in Ohio between September 1999 and January 2002. The data included focus group interviews, phone interviews, surveys, and the principals' completed portfolios.

Findings – From analysis of the data three levels of benefits from level 1 are desribed, where the portfolio was seen primarily as extra work and had little benefit for the leadership in the principals' schools, to level 3, where there was a reciprocal benefit between the portfolio process and the principals' growth and developed as leaders.

Research limitations/implications – This study was limited to one state in the USA, a particular portfolio system, and data were collected from only a subset of principals who completed their portfolios (26 out of 70).

Practical implications – The results of this research indicated that the portfolio work was seen as professional development by principals only if it was contextualized in a larger supportive social network of professional practice. It was the use of the portfolio to promote professional development that allowed the portfolio to be a learning tool, and not just a tool of policy compliance.

Originality/value – This research adds to the literature on professional development for principals by providing evidence that portfolios can be used with novice principals to support their development as leaders in their schools. It also indicates the kinds of social and professional support necessary to make this work.

Keywords Principals, Professional education, Management accountability, United States of America

Paper type Research paper

With increasing demands and changing expectations in the role of school administration, researchers, practitioners and policy makers and departments of education have become socially preoccupied with educational accountability (Normore, 2004, p. 55).

The state of Ohio in the USA, riding this wave of increased demands for administrator accountability, piloted a portfolio evaluation system for new principals. This paper

reports on the evaluation of this statewide, four-year process. It is a qualitative study of the benefits and burdens of this particular portfolio assessment approach.

Ohio was one of five states that participated in a field test of the Portfolio Assessment for School Leaders designed by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) and the Educational Testing Service (ETS) ... The Ohio Department of Education asked to be included in this field test because of its interest in a performance-based evaluation system for beginning principals to complement the recently adopted Praxis III performance-based evaluation of beginning teachers. This field test was conducted in five regionalized early career principals' academies in the state of Ohio. Volunteer administrators began their academy experiences in September 1999; they were to have completed portfolios by the end of January 2002, making it a three-year process. Policy implications and a description of the implementation of this portfolio process for principal evaluation conclude the paper.

The six components in the ETS Portfolio Assessment for School Leaders are:

(1) Facilitating the vision of learning within the school community (A.1).

(2) Sustaining a culture conducive to student learning (A.2).

(3) Understanding and responding to the larger context (B.1).

(4) Collaborating with families and community (B.2).

(5) Supporting professional growth and development (C.1).

(6) Organizing resources for and effective learning environment (C.2).

The portfolio components build capacities that go across the six ISLLC (Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium) standards (www.ccso.org/projects/ Interstate_School_Leaders_Licensure_Consortium/). Some components cut across more standards than others. The ISLLC Standards for School Leaders define a school leader as one who:

• facilitates the vision of learning within a school community;

• sustains a culture conducive to student learning;

• understands and responds to the larger context;

• collaborates with families and community;

• supports professional growth and development; and

• organizes resources for an effective learning environment.

Because of the geographical size of the regions in Ohio, most of the academies organized into smaller dispersed learning clusters. Each of these clusters was made up of veteran principals and early career principals organized in different ways. There was considerable variation in the background and skill level of these leaders. Some had led experiences like these before and others were doing this kind of work for the first time. Some of the regions provided training for leaders – others did not. One region organized around whole group activities. In this region, its coordinator and curriculum specialists led all of the activities. Several of the regions had one or more large meetings but none of them (other than the one region just mentioned) used large group meetings as their regular mode of operation.

Regions/cluster groups also differed in their stated intents and purposes. Some regions and some clusters committed to producing portfolios but not to engaging in

other professional development activities. Other regions and clusters chose to produce portfolios in a larger context of professional development. As you will see, this difference turned out to be important.

This study assessed the impact of the portfolio work on the professional practices of 26 early career principals. We found little relationship between scores on the portfolio and professional practices; there was, however, a strong relationship between the varied approaches in the region or cluster group and the degree to which the portfolio work was important and interactive with the participants' leadership and growth as principals.

The study was conducted by one of the regional coordinators (Mike xxx, an insider) and a university qualitative researcher (Marilyn xxx, an outsider). Our different positions helped us to interpret the data and interrogate our findings from different perspectives related to the portfolio project.

Background

In 1997 the Ohio Department of Education used Goals 2000 funds to initiate a statewide principals' academy. The purpose of this academy was to provide quality standards-based (ISLLC standards), job-embedded professional development for early career principals. As a part of the academy design, early career principals were provided with mentors and all participants went through a portfolio-based curriculum. By 1999 the Ohio Department of Education liked enough of what the academy was doing that the concept was expanded and organized into five regions.

The portfolios that emerged from these regional academies and from similar work in four other states were to be used by ETS to create scoring norms for the portfolio process. Of the 125 early career principals who chose to participate in this academy, 70 portfolios were completed and submitted to the Educational Testing Service for the norming process. In May of 2002, ETS conducted a session to train and score the portfolios that were submitted from all five states. As a result of this process a recommendation was made to the Ohio legislature to use the ETS/ISLLC portfolio process as one of the gateway requirements to administrative licensure.

Since this study was concluded in 2002 there has been a group of entry year principals who began in fall 2003 who will finish March 2005. They are working through the portfolio process completing sections A1 and A2 only. However, beginning with the 2004-2005 year, the State Department of Education decided to leave the content of inducting entry year principals to the OASSA (Ohio Association of Secondary School Administrators) and OAESA (Ohio Association of Elementary School Administrators). The consequence is the end of using the portfolio process for new principals. Instead, there will be a series of workshops for new principals on separate topics – scheduling, budgeting, legal issues, etc. The accountability format will be a checklist of things to be completed. The Ohio Principals Academy will provide the mentoring for entry year principals and in the Central Ohio Region there will be an effort to connect the real work of leadership with the mentoring but the portfolio process is no longer an option. Consequently, this paper reports on a pilot project with the ETS portfolio process that has not subsequently been adopted by the State of Ohio.

Research participants and questions

In the study of the pilot four-year portfolio project presented here, the participants were a subset of the 70 people who completed the portfolio in Ohio between September 1999 and January 2002.

The central question of this study was: Does the Portfolio Assessment for School Leaders process benefit or burden the practice of school leaders? While leadership of school principals has been widely studied, the influence of the portfolio process on developing school leaders has had little study. The literature on school reform provided the larger context for our research. Authors who write about change are often pessimistic about the potential influence of the principal related to schools change. Sarason (1990, 1996) describes schools as loosely coupled systems where principals do not have a tight connection with what teachers do and this limits their potential to create change. Weick (1979) earlier compared tight and loosely coupled institutions arguing that loosely coupled contexts are hard to change. In contrast, others argue for ways to create leadership positions from which principals can effect change. Reeves (1998) argues that leaders need to take care to center their work on issues of fairness to all stakeholders and that this provides a platform from which leadership efforts can be effective. Our questions used these conflicting positions to investigate the viability of using a portfolio process to encourage leadership development for principals.

The findings from our study are used to address a subsequent policy question: Is the ISLLC/ETS Portfolio Assessment for School Leaders a valid way to license beginning principals? This project had both research and program evaluation purposes. As a research study, it focused on the impact of the portfolio process on principals' leadership in their buildings. As an evaluation study, it was "designed and conducted to assist some audience[s] to assess an object's merit and worth" (Stufflebeam, 2000, p. 35), in this case, the viability of the ETS portfolio process to license principals. The specific purposes of this program evaluation were:

- to inform judgments about the usefulness of the ETS portfolio-based approach for beginning principals;
- to improve future program effectiveness; and
- to inform policy decisions about uses of portfolio evaluation more broadly (Patton, 1997; Stufflebeam, 2000).

Literature review

The literature to inform this study is more about the social context of school administrator's learning than specifically about the portfolio process itself. Although portfolios related to licensure have a literature and a political context of interest to this study, we focus here on the research and theoretical perspectives that were the primary influence on conducting and evaluating this project.

Peterson (2002) reports that between 2002 and 2007 school districts will be replacing more than 60 percent of all principals. Grogan and Andrews (2002) report that projected future shortages of qualified principal candidates to fill vacancies may be as high as 47 percent to 55 percent. In addition, principals are no longer expected to be primarily effective managers, they are expected to be leaders who use national and local mandates and community interests as the context for leading reform initiatives that support teacher collaboration and professional development, as well as increased

student achievement in response to increased pressures for accountability. Leaders are expected to be more organic and collegial than rational, bureaucratic, mechanistic, and managerial (Marshall *et al.*, 1996). There is more focus on interpersonal perspectives, on developing collegiality, a focus on learning for teachers and students (Andrews, 1994; Sergiovanni, 1998). As Barth (1990) argues, schools must be places where adults learn if they are to be places that are educative for students.

Principals are also expected to be "stewards of the vision and mission of the school or school district" (Grogan and Andrews, 2002, p. 243). Stewardship, for Sergiovanni (1998), involves principals and their teachers practicing leadership as a form of pedagogy. Principals are also expected to be sensitive to issues of diversity and social justice. Murphy (1999) describes a framework for re-culturing school leadership using three metaphors – educator, moral steward, and community builder. These evolving and expanded expectations for principal leadership require new kinds of training and professional development programs, which typically include mentoring programs to support new principals as they enter the profession.

Peterson (2002) describes a number of exemplary programs, including the one described in this paper, and makes recommendations for the design of professional development programs for principals. Peterson and others are in agreement that professional development must be focused on principals' learning and preparation for leadership. In the Ohio Principals' Academy the focus was on the establishment of learning communities as the context for such learning and professional development. While the initial draw of the program was to pilot the portfolio process, learning and professional development were at the core of the goals for this program. Orientations to professional development, however, varied across the five regions in this project. There were confidentiality issues and political reasons for not identifying different approaches to specific regions related to how they supported, or did not support, principals' growth and leadership. Nevertheless, our findings do suggest important differences and Wenger's theoretical perspective helped us to explain these differences. A sense of trust related to confidentiality and the related issue of validity in the responses is somewhat confirmed by the fact that many principals were willing to speak quite frankly about problems and their concerns about the portfolio process.

Wenger's work Wenger (1998) on "communities of practice" looks at the interconnections between learning, meaning, identity, practice, and community – all elements that are relevant to this study. He identifies "essential dualities" – participation and reification, design and emergence, local and global, and identification and negotiability – that were evident in the portfolio process. We use these "dualities" (what we call tensions) in discussing the findings of this study.

Methods
The methods used for this study were standard qualitative procedures of naturalistic evaluation and research. We used a structured protocol for both the interviews and focus group discussions (see Appendix 1). A follow-up survey was used to provide additional and consistent data from all participants (see Appendix 2). Our methodology was situated in an interpretivist theoretical framework that acknowledges the influence of the perspectives of the researchers at all stages of the data collection and analyses (Patton, 1990).

Participants
The 26 participants in this study were a representative sample from the 70 principals who completed the portfolio (125 principals began the process) with a completion rate of 56 percent. Participants were selected based on ETS portfolio scores (maximizing the range of scores), gender, and school level placements.

Data sources
The primary data for this study were focus group discussions conducted in each of the five regions of the state. In some regions, schedules, illness, emergencies at school, and driving distances meant smaller groups than had been planned. We followed up with phone interviews reaching at least four participants in each region for a total of 26 interviews. In one region we conducted an extra focus group when by chance there was a group meeting with volunteers willing to stay after and talk with us. The overall data sources included:

(1) Focus groups discussions with participants in each of the five regions in Ohio lasting between two and two-and-a-half hours each. A total of 18 principals participated in focus group discussions;

(2) Phone interviews (eight individual) to increase and equalize the number of participants in each of the regions;

(3) A follow-up survey sent to all participants to extend the data on issues that emerged from the focus groups and interviews;

(4) Completed principal portfolios for all participants; and

(5) Annual regional evaluation reports and regional meeting minutes.

Data analysis
All focus group conversations and individual interviews were audio taped and transcribed. One researcher was primarily responsible for asking questions; the second researcher kept written notes. We debriefed after each focus group making notes on our impressions and questions, and proposing possible alterations for the next focus group discussion. For the focus group data, we paid particular attention to three basic factors in determining how much emphasis a given topic should receive in reporting the data. These included how many groups mentioned the topic, how many people within each group mentioned the topic, and how much energy and enthusiasm the topic generated among participants (Morgan, 1997, p. 63). We also looked for similarities across the groups to establish group-to-group validation. To analyze the focus group and interview data, emergent themes were identified by the two researchers and then compared and negotiated (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The data were then coded using these themes utilizing the Nudist software program. Differences in scoring were negotiated between the two researchers. Interpretations of the data were developed separately and then together. Other documentation (portfolios, evaluation reports, and regional meeting minutes) was used to supplement interpretations.

A survey was developed following the completion of the focus group discussions and interviews in order to collect consistent data on additional topics and topics with only scattered responses. Of the 26 principals, 20 responded to the survey and the

responses were used to triangulate the data in order to extend and/or validate some participants' responses.

Our analyses are reported in two ways. First, we describe three levels of influence that emerged from the data analysis[1]. These levels indicate the different ways in which the portfolio work benefited or did not benefit the leadership practice of these participants. Second, we describe the necessary but not sufficient connection between these three levels of influence: the quality and kind of support participants received during the portfolio process; and the orientation to portfolio work embodied in their regions and/or cluster groups. We then use Wenger's theory of community and the tensions he describes within communities of practice to further interpret and theorize our findings. Wenger's work influenced our thinking throughout this project. His theoretical work was useful in framing the professional development of principals and in the evaluation of the program. In particular it helped to describe the underlying tensions in the principals' portfolio work. We conclude with the policy implications of this research.

Levels of influence

The heart of our findings lies in the description of three levels of benefits that emerged from our data analyses. These three levels reveal different kinds of benefits and burdens for the principals in this study. The levels move from level 1 where the portfolio was seen primarily as extra work and had little benefit for the leadership in their schools while level 3 demonstrates a reciprocal benefit between the portfolio process and the principals' growth and development as leaders.

Level 1: extra work

Principals whose experience fit into this level did not find the portfolio useful. They were busy with many things and the portfolio was just another task to do. There were seven principals (from a total of 26) in this category from three of the five regions. One of the principal's said:

> The quality may have been less than what I'd like. I did it to complete it rather than grow from it. Because of time constraints, because it was a pilot, not an actual requirement, it wasn't at the top of my list. The whole project is a kind of reaction; you're doing things to meet deadlines, because you're required. It's not a proactive thing (Doug).

As another principal explained:

> It was a project you have to get done. Was it professional development in terms of doing it? Yes. Was it professional development in terms of pulling it down and using it? Not for me, not at this point (Calvin).

At this level, principals did not find meaningful relationships of the portfolio work to their practice.

> When we started on it, I personally felt that it was totally unrelated to practice ... The demographics stuff helped me learn something about the community I was working in. Another section wasn't too bad: if you were involved in evaluations, you could pick someone and do a plan. I wasn't involved in evaluation [as an assistant principal] so I had to create something. The rest of it seemed arbitrary to what I was doing on a daily basis (Teresa).

This same principal, however, thought that if the district used the portfolio process so that all the principals in her district were working on it together, it would be more relevant and useful:

> *Teresa:* I think it was just in general not relevant. If it was connected to a strategic plan, everyone in the district were connected to a strategic plan and we could work together on it, and then take something you are working on and demonstrate the process you're going through, then it's part of your practice, it's nothing in addition to practice. I just did the work; it was a pain in the butt, more than something professionally useful. Once I did something then I looked back and said, "Hey, I could write about that.

> *Vivian:* Yeah, I had to look back and do it later.

> *Teresa:.* I ended up doing everything back-ass-ward. I went through, rather than come up with what you want to do and collect evidence. When it was down to the wire, I just found stuff to work with what I wanted to say in the end.

The suggestion here is that the portfolio might be best done in contexts where there are shared goals and purposes and where principals can talk about shared goals and problems within their district.

For principals at level one, the portfolio was primarily extra work and did not directly support or influence their leadership.

Level 2: retrospective reflection
At the second level, principals found most of the value at the end of the process. There were seven principals at this level, from four of the regions. They did not have time to complete the portfolio until toward the end of the process. Most of them completed Section A1 where they collected demographic data on their school and district and they found this helpful. They collected paper work documentation and did some beginning work for some of the sections, but it wasn't until they were completing the final product that they really saw any value in the portfolio work. The portfolio primarily documented their learning and accomplishments:

> After I got the whole thing done I thought, "Well that wasn't so bad". You can see a growth process of what my thinking was when I initially started out and where it was (Oliver).

> I was operating in retrospect, if I had figured out in advance where I was going with it then I could have had the conversations and started collecting the data as I went along, rather than having to go back and find it . . . It's helped now that I have reflected, it's helped me to think about how I work on problems, how I work with a group of people to solve problems and bring in other people. It's helped with my work with the staff (Ruth).

For another principal, he could only see value in it later, but even that was limited:

> It's a good piece to refer back afterwards, but at the time I was doing it, it was mumbojumbo, okay, got to get it done by the deadline . . . It was more of a burden (Bob).

One of the principals found value in her completed portfolio when she was suddenly moved to a new position:

> I got my job ten days before school opened . . . I sat down and re-read my portfolio. I had to slow down and look at some research and get grounded . . . I had to have something that was my security blanket. I read my portfolio, I took pride in it, I spent time with it. I started by reaffirming who I was. Then I went to the notebook that the regional [group had] developed.

It had standards, calendar of what to do each month, practical examples of standards and implementation, I made an overhead of the standards this is what I have to do, and you have to do, to keep my job. It was a meaningful process for me (Nancy).

At level 2, the value of the portfolio work primarily came at the end of the process. It had little influence on their leadership while they were working through the process, primarily because they did most of the writing and reflecting at the end, when the deadlines were close and/or it was summer time and they had more time to work on it. It is possible that completing the portfolio may have influence on their leadership in the future, but this would be a question for future research.

Level 3: supported leadership

At level 3, principals found the portfolio process valuable. It documented what they were doing as they went along. They reflected on problems and documented their work as they addressed barriers in their schools or developed new initiatives, partly guided by their portfolio work. There were 12 principals at this level (just half of the 25 participants) from three of the five regions.

Looking at the "big picture" and "reflection" were frequently mentioned in level three discussions. For example: "It's allowed me to focus on the big picture – I had to put a plan together that I felt comfortable to bring to my staff" (Matt).

Reflection was mentioned many times throughout the data collection conversations: "The portfolio helped me to reflect." "It's about reflection." "There's not enough time during school to reflect, the portfolio process forced me to do that reflection." As one principal explained:

I may sound like a broken record on this, but I think it's the reflective piece. It forces you to be reflective about your practice that you may not have the luxury of otherwise (Nathan).

One principal related reflection to what principals ask their teachers to do:

That [reflection required by the portfolio] is not much different than what we ask our teachers to do in terms of trying to improve student learning. Reflect on your practice, tell me how your day went today, or what you would do differently tomorrow (Oliver).

For some principals, reflection was not something they had done much previously:

I hadn't done a lot of that [reflection] until you all [the coordinators]; we started talking about things, writing things down. I'm not big on that, but I do find myself everyday now for 15 minutes before I go home, jotting things down, I sit back and say, "I'm done with this", and I reflect on what I did, what I need to do, and so I can be more organized and focused (Matt).

The principals at this level describe a kind of reciprocal process between their work on the portfolio and their principalship, but were often not clear about the starting point. Was it the portfolio process that influenced their leadership, or was it their work in school that was then assessed through the portfolio process, or more possibly, some interaction between the two. They often had difficulty describing explicit connections between the portfolio process and work in their schools. They were positive about the process, but couldn't easily identify specific ways in which they had done things differently because they were working on the portfolio. One principal's comments reflected the sense of many at this level:

If you ask the question, "Is the portfolio leading our work?" the answer would be no. Our work comes first and then we really reported it in a portfolio format. The reflective piece helps us to stay focused on a leadership rather than a managerial focus for our building (Mary).

Later in the focus group conversation this principal talked about a major "realignment of classrooms" and concluded that the portfolio work actually "did impact some systemic changes", but it appeared to be a reciprocal process between the portfolio work and leadership efforts rather than one aspect influencing the other. Another administrator felt that it definitely had had an impact:

It [the portfolio] had to have an influence because you are thinking through this process before you go before the masses and shoot from the hip, which I think a lot of the time happened before. Writing this out and thinking this through, if nothing else, you do a better job of delivering your initial talk with the group because you have a better sense of the story. So that's even richer. You feel more prepared. I felt more prepared at team meetings. I had information and data at my fingertips that helped me to be more successful for the things I was trying to communicate. It does help (Jack).

For this administrator, the portfolio forced reflection and planning that made him feel more confident and prepared.

These three levels capture the different ways the portfolio process evolved and the varied levels of influence on their work as principals.

Group support and orientation

Participants' level of benefit (levels 1, 2, and 3) was in large part determined by the quality and kind of support participants received during the portfolio process, and the orientation to portfolio work embodied in their regions and/or cluster groups. But while these factors appear to be necessary for high levels of benefit, they do not appear to be sufficient to that end.

In regions or clusters where there were few regional meetings and/or the cluster organization fell apart, portfolios were completed as a compliance task. We found no cases where these individuals reported strong connections between portfolio work and practice, even though some of them received high scores on their portfolio. Other than the time it took to complete the portfolio, these administrators reported very little benefit or enhancement to their administrative practice. The portfolio was an additional task to be completed but it did little to cause administrators to rethink the processes or products associated with school administration (Level 1).

In places where groups met consistently and there was social support for the portfolio work, three different sets of orientations and outcomes were observed. For some, gatherings served only the purpose of developing a portfolio. In these regions or cluster groups, participants typically found portfolio work to be practically difficult and of little value to their practice. This compliance orientation produced portfolios but there was little evidence that portfolio work had any real impact on practice (Level 1).

There were also regions and/or clusters that spent time together talking about practice and producing a portfolio. These participants talked about the positive value of coming together, but for many, their portfolio work had little immediate effect on practice. These participants generally saw the portfolio as a disruption to practice while they were doing the portfolio, but it did not result in positive reflection or outcomes until after the work was completed (Level 2).

Finally, there were regions and/or cluster groups that used the portfolio as a tool for improving practice. The focus was on using the various components of the portfolio to develop skills helpful in critically examining their practice and assumptions, and acquiring skills to work more skillfully with their teachers in the process. They needed a place away from school where they could talk, read, and work together. As one principal described it:

> I came here and I got time away from the building to think about things that were important. I was in an organization that not only said that reading professionally was important but they provided opportunities and basically financed some of it. Part of the door prizes was giving away professional readings. I was in seventh heaven. I did this for me. It was important and it was fun (Frank).

The community of practice also gave them skills and ideas to take back and test in their daily practice. One principal said:

> The tools that we have been exposed to in the Academy, the affinity diagramming, the plus/deltas, the fishbone … have been important tools in learning how to work with [my] staff (Gail).

Many in the groups with this professional development orientation found portfolio work to be difficult and time consuming, but they also reported that portfolio-related activities influenced both the substance and the quality of their practice. The portfolio served as a positive benefit to their practice. These school administrators described the portfolio and the processes that accompanied it as having the capacity to benefit both the process and products of school administration. Many of these participants talked about the portfolio as a tool that brought more depth and substance to their work (Level 3). Some found that the portfolio process was useful because of what was already happening in their schools – change was already on their agenda. As one of the principals explained:

> The portfolio kept me focused, it drove the decisions that I made all year. I knew that I must sleep, eat, drink, the Ohio proficiency objectives. Because of the way I wrote my portfolio, I know what they were and I learned to analyze data.... It helped me reflect and know my school community, the kind of building I have. We have 87 percent free and reduced lunch and mostly Appalachian students. The portfolio helped me to describe the school community, I had to learn about Appalachian culture through reading and through dialogue about many different issues I saw … It [the portfolio] was always in the back of my mind as we made our change plans (Sharon).

In what is described above, the presence or lack of a community and professional development orientation in the portfolio process appears to be an important, but not sufficient, influence on the relationship between portfolio work and practice. Where there was little community, there was little connection between portfolio work and practice. By contrast, principals valued coming together to talk about practice where there was a sense of community. In some cases the portfolio was central to this conversation and in others it simply provides a ready excuse to meet. In cases where the portfolio was central to the conversation, many of these participants reported that the portfolio process enhanced their practice.

Wenger's communities of practice

The literature on "communities of practice", especially Etienne Wenger (1998) work, is useful to explain the connection between the portfolio process and administrative practice developed within the context of a social community focused on learning. Wenger's conception of a social theory of learning includes the following elements:

- *Meaning*: a way of talking about our (changing) ability – individually and collectively–to experience our life and the world as meaningful.
- *Practice*: a way of talking about the shared historical and social resources, frameworks, and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action.
- *Community*: a way of talking about the social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognizable as competence.
- *Identity*: a way of talking about how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities (Wegner, 1998, p. 5).

For Wenger, learning as an activity defines our meaning structure, our practices, our identity, and our social relations. Each of the learning components provides a different means to that end, namely, learning as experience, learning as doing, learning as belonging, and learning as becoming. Powerful, more substantive learning experiences embody all of these components.

In explaining the interdependence of these components Wenger says:

> Clearly, these elements are deeply interconnected and mutually defining. In fact ... you could switch any of the four peripheral components with learning, place it in the center as the primary focus ... Therefore, when I use the concept of "community of practice" ... I really use it as a point of entry into a broader conceptual framework of which it is a constitutive element. The analytical power of the concept lies precisely in that it integrates the components (Wenger, 1998, pp. 5-6).

For Wenger, the reciprocity among the four elements forms the basis of his meaning of communities of practice. In terms of this study, the greatest learning occurred within those individuals whose communities of practice allowed them to make new meaning of their work in this kind of integrative way – to improve their practice and reconstitute their identity as school administrators within a community of practice. Those who were missing any of the components had experiences that were, in terms of learning, less meaningful.

At the conclusion of Wenger's book he describes how aspects of his theory affect the design of any kind of learning enterprise. Designing contexts for learning involves the interplay of four different sets of dualities – participation and reification, designed and emergent, local and global, and competence and growth. The relations between each of these dualities played out this study.

Participation and reification

The meaning making processes associated with learning and growth are dependent on both active participation and on the reification or documentation of that practice. Neither participation nor reification, by itself, necessarily leads to learning. Learning

occurs as we participate in practice, reify that practice, and look, both individually and collectively, for patterns that emerge.

This is a central tension in the design of a portfolio-based learning experience. The findings from this study support the proposition that learning processes must engender both participation and reifications of that participation if they are to produce meaningful learning. If, for example, principals participate in activities that leave no discernable trail (reification), there is little for their group to examine and little from which they can learn. Conversely, if principals create reifications (written documents) only to satisfy the needs of their region or cluster group, that is, reifications that have little connection to their practice, these reifications have little value with respect to learning. It is only when participation/practice is tightly coupled with reification/documentation that meaningful learning emerges.

In our study, participants valued most those processes that engendered authentic participation and meaningful reifications. The ISLLC/ETS portfolio process asks participants to connect documentation to practice. If administrators saw their practice as separate from what they were asked to document then the portfolio process served little purpose with respect to learning. Portfolio documentation must be connected to the "real" practice of administrators if that documentation/reification is to be useful.

In this study we witnessed the entire gamut of responses in relation to this process. In some cases, the portfolio was a wonderful learning tool, an essential part of the development of administrators, when participants were able to connect the portfolio work with their real work as administrators. When the reifications associated with the portfolio were disconnected from their practice, the portfolio did not contribute substantially to learning. Interestingly, most of the participants in this study did not talk about learning. Instead, those at level three talked about meaning, practice, identity, and community, the four constituent elements of learning that Wenger includes in schematic of learning.

Designed and emergent

A second tension for Wenger is between that which is designed and that which is emergent. A critical tension in the design of any learning process is the mix between structure and flexibility. How much structure is necessary to get people moving in productive directions? How much flexibility is necessary to allow participants to personalize their learning? High quality learning emerges from the productive tension between these poles. How does one design emergence and facilitate emergent design?

This tension is embedded in the portfolio process. How much structure do participants need to produce portfolios that suit their learning needs? Most of the early career administrators wanted a portfolio process that was highly structured and prescriptive. Because this was a process to create norms for the portfolio, there were no exemplars to substantively define high quality work. There were also elements of the portfolio process that changed because the process was in a developmental phase. Early career principals may indeed feel paralyzed if the portfolio process is too open to interpretation.

While most of the principals initially wanted more structure, some clearly wanted processes that allowed for emergent learning. A well-designed portfolio process could be a legitimate means of exploring potential administrative identities, especially if the

process allowed them to look both broadly and deeply at the multiple elements that constitute their administrative practices.

For some of the principals, there were too many problems or they had too a limited view of the scope of administrative practice to make a more flexible approach palatable. For others, they either initially, or later, came to also appreciate the emergent aspects of the portfolio process that allowed them to design the portfolio in ways that supported their professional growth and leadership in their building.

Local and global
Wenger's third design tension is implicit across the regions and cluster groups. Who designs learning processes? Whose purposes are served in the portfolio processes? Is the learning associated with doing a portfolio transferable to school administration? What role do the experiences necessary to producing a portfolio play in redefining school administration?

In its simplest form this tension is about the relationship between local work (specific work on the portfolio in regions and in the clusters) and global meaning (more general understandings about administration, leadership, and school/district/national contexts). What is the value of producing a portfolio in the larger scheme of things? One principal at level 3 reported:

> It's allowed me to focus on the big picture – I had to put a plan together that I felt comfortable to bring to my staff (Matt).

In this area, reflection was mentioned many times: "The portfolio helped me to reflect." "It's about reflection." "There's not enough time during school to reflect, the portfolio process forced me to do that reflection." As one principal explained:

> I may sound like a broken record on this, but I think it's the reflective piece. It forces you to be reflective about your practice that you may not have the luxury of otherwise (Nathan).

Like the rest of these design tensions portfolio work is useful when the local and the global are intimately related. For many of our principals at level three, these connections were demonstrated in the ways they talked about connections between portfolio work and their emerging leadership abilities and understandings. At level one, there was only reference to the goal of producing the portfolio product (global) but this had little relation or interaction with the principal's school leadership (local). At level two, this tension came into play at the end of the process when they were doing most of the writing and had time to reflect on what they had accomplished through this process.

The local/global tension includes another set of issues. Is the portfolio being constructed to demonstrate competence (a global issue) or to stimulate growth (a local issue)? For many principals, these two purposes seemed contradictory. If a portfolio is being used as a means of certifying or licensing a principal, then a principal may be reluctant to focus on problems of practice. If the portfolio is designed to provoke growth, problems of practice are essential elements. How is this tension resolved?

The most logical way to address this tension is to rethink the relationship between competence and problems. The managerial mindset that has come to dominate schools and other service-related institutions tends to value stability over change and equates competence with the absence of problems. From Wenger's perspective, we must come

to view competence as an index of learning where competence is demonstrated through processes that include collaborative problem solving and collective efforts to create change. This is especially important in an era when leadership and change dominate conversations about education.

Overall, the processes that characterized the more successful regions and clusters made it safe to reveal and talk about problems of practice. Because the portfolio is a tool to focus attention and conversation, this study shows the value of this process when it is oriented toward professional development. Without support and this professional development orientation, the portfolio for these participants was primarily a compliance task or a record of their work that was valued later but had little direct impact on practice. Wenger's theory of communities of practice was useful to interpreting the results of this study and this suggests the possibility of framing a portfolio process around the concept of learning and tensions he describes, if the preferred outcome is a strong connection between the portfolio process and professional development for early career principals.

Policy implications
This study has several implications for educational policy. These implications are related to two questions:

(1) Is the portfolio process as designed by ISLLC/ETS useful for assessment purposes?

(2) Does the portfolio process have enough learning value to justify the amount of work it takes to produce it?

The first of these questions is relatively straightforward. The results of this study help us with the second.

For the first question, Barton and Collins (1997) define seven characteristics that are essential if portfolios are used for the purposes of assessment. Assessment portfolios must be:

(1) *Multi-sourced* – data must include both people and artifacts.

(2) *Authentic* – evidence must directly connect the portfolio with professional context.

(3) *Dynamic* – evidence must look at performance through time.

(4) *Explicit* – purpose and goals of the portfolio must be clearly defined.

(5) *Integrated* – portfolio must directly connect skills and knowledge to real episodes of practice.

(6) *Based on ownership* – participant must select relevant evidence to fit real professional and/or personal goals.

(7) *Multi-purposed* – portfolio should assess both personal and organizational performance.

The ISLLC/ETS portfolio process by its design is multi-sourced, authentic, dynamic, integrated, and multi-purposed. Criteria 4 and 6 are problematic in terms of the Ohio design. The essential purpose of the Ohio pilot was to produce enough portfolios to allow ETS to norm the scoring process. This goal by itself is probably not sufficient to produce the quality of portfolio necessary for licensure. The motivation of the

participants in this study was very different from the motivation of principals whose licensure was on the line. For the same reasons, ownership may also be a problem with the Ohio participants. It is not clear that the outcomes associated with this process "fit real professional and/or personal goals" for many of the participants. Those at level three found ways to make the process fit their goals; others did not.

Given these caveats, the portfolio process defined by ISLLC is appropriate to use in the assessment of administrators. The question policy makers in Ohio are struggling with is whether to situate the portfolio as a high or low stakes component of licensure. At this point in time the Ohio Department of Education has approved the portfolio as one aspect of a low/medium stakes process. Entry-year principals will be granted professional licenses if they can "satisfactorily complete" the portfolio process. Discussions of the criteria for satisfactory completion are still in process.

Question two is a more intriguing policy question: Does the portfolio process have enough value to justify the amount of work it takes to produce it? The results of our study would say that they do if, and only if, portfolio work is contextualized in a larger supportive social network of professional development. It is the use of the portfolio to promote professional development that allows the portfolio to be a learning tool and not just a tool of policy compliance. The only reason to use portfolios as assessment tools is if you value the learning that portfolios can produce. If a state or school system is only interested in whether a principal meets minimum competency standards, there are far easier and less cumbersome tools that can be employed.

Note

1. A longer and more inclusive version of the data analysis from the evaluation report for this study is available from the authors. It includes other thematic topics from the research findings including: the journey (why people got involved, why they finished, and what the process was like; support for portfolio work (from regional and cluster groups, mentors, from state meetings and school districts); challenges to doing the portfolio; and suggestions related to the portfolio work.

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Appendix 1. Protocol for focus group interviews and follow-up phone interviews

(1) How was your region organized and what happened when you meet, in the group or with your mentor? What kinds of support did you receive? From whom?

(2) Did you find any value to the regional and statewide meetings? What happened – work on portfolio, professional development, network?

(3) Which components were most and less helpful?

(4) When did you find time to work on the portfolio?

(5) What was the most challenging aspect of the portfolio work? What was most personally satisfying, if anything?

(6) Were your teachers aware of your portfolio work? Were you able to use the portfolio as a reform tool?

(7) Did you change your mind about anything associated with your principalship as a result of the portfolio process?

(8) What value does this process have for entry year licensure? For professional development?

(9) Did you use the portfolio process retrospectively or to help you lead?

(10) If you knew then what you know now would you do the portfolio again? Would you be willing to mentor another administrator who had to go through this process?

Appendix 2.

	Strongly agree		Strongly disagree	
1. I had consistent support from my mentor.	1	2	3	4
2. I got feedback on my writing.	1	2	3	4
3. I got feedback on my portfolio work.	1	2	3	4
5. My mentor and I had time to meet together.	1	2	3	4
6. Regional meetings supported my portfolio work.	1	2	3	4
7. Regional meetings supported my professional development.	1	2	3	4
8. Regional meetings were a valuable time to share with other principals.	1	2	3	4
9. State meetings supported my professional development.	1	2	3	4
10. State meetings supported the development of my portfolio work	1	2	3	4
11. The portfolio was primarily another task with little impact or influence on my leadership in my school.	1	2	3	4
12. Doing the portfolio led to changes in my building.	1	2	3	4
13. The portfolio primarily documented what I would have done anyway as a principal.	1	2	3	4
14. The portfolio supported increased reflection on my principalship.	1	2	3	4
15. The portfolio process supported my leadership in my building.	1	2	3	4
16. I got what I needed from those who were supposed to be supporting me through this process.	1	2	3	4
17. I would be interested in being a mentor to principals going through the portfolio process.	1	2	3	4
18. If I were to begin the portfolio process again, I would be able to use the process more effectively to support my leadership and reform initiatives.	1	2	3	4
19. I support this portfolio process for new principals.	1	2	3	4

Other comments or explanations of items above: (please put number of item in front of your response if it is related to a specific item above)

Short answer questions:

1. While working on the portfolio, what administrative position(s) did you hold?

2. __ check if you earned university credit for work on your portfolio. Where?

3. What was the primary value, if any, of the portfolio work for you?

4. From your experience, what year(s) would you recommend that new principals go through the portfolio process?

name _____ circle your region: xx   xx   xx   xx

Figure A1.
Principal follow-up survey