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Program Coordinators Disposition Toward Educational Leadership Best Practices

Practicum Experience In Georgia

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ABSTRACT

The importance of field experiences in educational leadership was well documented in literature. However, scholars and practitioners disagreed on how field experiences should be provided to achieve the greatest effect. On the other hand, practicum efficiency and effectiveness were not assessed in the last ten years. Therefore, this study was designed to explore how field experiences are offered in the educational leadership programs (Master of Education and Add-On Program) in Georgia. Through data analysis, the researchers shared their observation of how field experiences in educational leadership could be enhanced in Georgia. Although the study was conducted in Georgia, the findings have nationwide implications.

Keywords: educational leadership, school management, child development

INTRODUCTION

Field experiences in educational leadership "bridge the gap between classroom practice and professional practice" (Chance, 1990) and serve as rites of passage for the teachers making their transition to aspiring principals (White & Crow, 1993). Activities in practicum experiences should link theory to practice (Cordeiro & Smith-Sloan, 1995). Williamson and Hudson (2001) cautioned that the absence of a linkage between theory and practice could inhibit learning outcome of aspiring administrators. Daresh (2002) argued that though some leadership preparation programs strived to etch the relationship between theory and practice in candidates' minds, many still shortchanged candidates due to insufficient program planning and field experience supervision. The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of educational leadership program coordinators (Master of Education and Add-On Programs) in Georgia relating to the design and operation of leadership field experiences. The best practices of practicum activities were analyzed in light of the infrastructure of educational system in Georgia. The findings of this study would be beneficial to improving educational leadership programs in Georgia and the nation as well.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Hall and Lutz (1989) argued that "the field experience in educational administration can best be completed in three phases: (1) introductory experiences; (2) internship; and (3) first-year consultation and support". Restine (1990) further investigated the phase issue by identifying four stages in the internship process termed initial, provisional, intermediate, and advanced. Pautler (1991) also proposed to develop the field experiences of educational leadership into three levels: aideship, internship, and associateship. Cordeiro and Smith-Sloan (1995) reviewed related literature and summarized that "internship programs should provide internship activities that vary in depth and complexity".

The approach to delivering field experiences in educational leadership programs was explored. Jackson and Kelley (2002) found that the variation in the quality of time spent in practicum experiences depended on the use of approaches to allow candidates to observe, participate in, and reflect on leadership issues. Joachim and Klotz (2000) identified areas of educational leadership that needed to be covered in the field experiences: "skills in school based

management, ability to lead diverse student populations, sensitivity to child development, effectiveness of instructional leaders, capability of establishing a community of learners, and accomplishment in reflective practices". Williamson and Hudson (2001) recommended that internship experience "can be strengthened when universities and local school districts enter into partnerships that acknowledge the realities and complexities of the principal's job". The success of field experiences depended very much on the collaboration between the university faculty and school administrators (Hall & Lutz, 1989), particularly a quality school principal (William and Hudson, 2001). However, Wilmore and Bratlien (2005) were disappointed to find that 60% of the respondents in their study reported having no formal mentor training, and 71% cited a lack of dedication on the part of the mentor. Cordeiro and Smith-Sloan (1995) drew our attention to reflection as an integral part of leadership internship while Jones and Blendinger (1997) focused on action research that served an important function in preparing future school administrators.

The results of offering field experiences in educational leadership were assessed by White and Crow (1993) who reported that candidates viewed themselves, home-school principals, mentor principals, and their teaching roles differently than before. However, Chance (1990) found that "although the internship has been an integral component of many administrator preparation programs for years, data on program design and impact on future administrators are somewhat limited". No recent research on the formal assessment of field experiences in educational leadership is located.

Solid recommendations were made by researchers to improve the effectiveness of the educational leadership field experiences. Bradshaw, Perreault, McDowelle, and Bell (1997) concluded in their study that candidates of full-time extended internship were very satisfied with the experience they gained and were better prepared for entry-level administrative positions than their part-time counterparts. Creighton (2001) recommended that "practice programs focus on what principals will actually do in a given circumstance, rather than what they might do". Gaudreau, Fufel, and Parks (2006) after a review of current literature summarized that "meeting the challenge of ensuring quality internships requires more research targeting effective field-based practices, performance assessments, and strong mentoring". (p. 30)

RATIONALE

The review of literature provided a strong support of the importance of field experiences in educational leadership. However, there was no consensus on how field experiences should be provided to achieve the greatest effect. The assessment of program efficiency and effectiveness was not examined in studies of the last decade. Therefore, this study was designed to explore how field experiences are provided in the educational leadership programs (Master of Education and Add-On Program) in Georgia. Through data analysis, the researchers provided insight into how educational leadership field experiences could be enhanced in Georgia. Although data were collected from programs in Georgia, the results of this study provide nationwide implications.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1.	What are the demographics of candidates enrolled in educational leadership practicum?
2.	How do university faculty design candidates' educational leadership practicum experiences in Georgia?
3.	How do field mentors collaborate with university faculty in providing educational leadership practicum experiences in Georgia?
4.	What are the requirements and expectations for educational leadership practicum candidates in Georgia?
5.	How is effectiveness assessed in educational leadership practicum in Georgia?
6.	How efficiently is practicum in educational leadership offered in Georgia?

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

This study was designed to examine how practicum opportunities in the educational leadership programs were offered in Georgia. A survey approach of qualitative nature was taken to solicit the facts and perceptions of

program coordinators regarding practicum activities. Follow-up telephone calls were made to the respondents to further clarify the nature and the significance of the programs.

PARTICIPANTS

All eleven program coordinators of the educational leadership programs in Georgia were invited to participate in the study. Eight program coordinators responded to the survey questions.

INSTRUMENTATION

The instrument for data collection in this study consists of 30 open-ended questions that relate to faculty participation, mentor engagement, and practicum activities. The instrument was designed by the researchers with *reference* to current literature. University practicum professors and field mentors were involved in validating the survey instrument.

PROCEDURE

All educational leadership program coordinators of Master of Education and Add-On Program in Georgia were identified and contacted. The established instrument developed for data collection was mailed to all program coordinators to solicit their perceptions of their Master of Education and Add-On Program. After reviewing the responses from the program coordinators, telephone interviews were scheduled for selected coordinators to follow up with in-depth questions to further understand the background of their programs and the decisions behind significant actions.

DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative data collected from the survey responses and the telephone interviews were divided into two major categories of facts and perceptions. They were summarized and analyzed through observation of patterns, developmental trends, and frequency occurrences.

FINDINGS

Of the eleven educational leadership programs invited to participate in this study, eight program coordinators responded, yielding a return rate of 73%. The findings of this study are presented below:

PROGRAM DEMOGRAPHICS

It was reported that candidate enrollment in the Master of Educational Leadership (MED) Program in all the eight participating universities was 504 with the highest enrollment of 250 and the lowest enrollment of 14. In the Educational Leadership Add-on program, a total of 479 candidates were enrolled with the highest enrollment of 250 and the lowest enrollment of 0. The eight programs covered 137 or 72.25% of the school districts in Georgia. The largest number of districts represented by one program was 40 and the least number of districts represented by one program was five. One program reported that one of its candidates lived 123 miles away from the university. Data analysis in this study indicated that an average of 30.3% of the candidates in the educational leadership program were males and 69.7 % females. An ethnic analysis of the data showed that 76.13% of the candidates were Caucasian and 23.87% were African American. One program reported having 2% Hispanic, 4% Asian, 11% Native American and 5% Others.

FACULTY INVOLVEMENT

The graduate faculty plays a key role in the developmental and collaborative process in offering practicum experiences to program candidates. The findings in this study indicated that an average of 57.89% of the full-time educational leadership faculty was involved in practicum supervisory responsibilities with a high percentage of 91.6

and a low percentage of 25. Part-time faculty's involvement indicated an average of 45.8% with a high percentage of 100 and a low percentage of 0. Part-time faculty's qualifications were high. The findings showed 66.6% of them held a doctor's degree and all of them had extensive school administrative experiences.

A practicum handbook to consist of delivery guidelines was agreed by the majority of the program coordinators to be serving a meaningful purpose. Since practicum was supervised by both full-time and part-time faculty, the guidelines really drew faculty members' attention to consistency of activities, level of supervision, and expectation of outcomes. In addition, most programs called for practicum supervisors to meet occasionally to review issues of common concerns. These meetings served as channels of communication that were most helpful to supervisors in working with mentors and candidates.

FIELD MENTORS' ENGAGEMENT

The mentor has day-to-day responsibility for the candidate's field experience. It is the mentor who is aware of specific strengths and needs, and who is able to offer guidance and assistance on an ongoing basis. Findings in this study indicated that in most programs candidates identified their mentors in the school they taught. One program reported no mentor selection process and one used an advisory board to comprise of area superintendents who selected mentors. Most programs did not sign contracts with field mentors since they were not paid. As far as mentor training, only three programs provided formal training for mentors and the remaining five programs at least provided mentors with practicum handbooks and Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) guidelines that were "discussed at the beginning of practicum". Mentors met with candidates in various schedules: weekly, or 2 to 4 times per semester. They played a key role in assessing candidates' performance in different ways: assessing by item, assessing by assigning a grade, providing verbal feedback and evaluating practicum projects. As verified by one of the program coordinators: "They meet with the practicum supervisor to discuss the interns progress. They also complete a mentor assessment on the intern."

PRACTICUM REQUIREMENTS AND ACTIVITIES

Results of the study showed that only 37.5% of the programs required a practicum contract with the candidates when they were admitted to their programs. When all the programs were asked to respond to the duration of the practicum, five programs required three semesters of practicum experience, and two required two semesters. Most of the programs required candidates to complete three to nine credit hours of practicum with logged-in hours from 60-250. Candidates in all the programs were invited to attend a seminar or group meeting once or twice a semester. All but one program required candidates to maintain weekly logs and reflections to be submitted two to three times a semester to the faculty supervisors. One program specified weekly submission and another program specified none. Four programs also encouraged candidates to share their reflections with their mentors. All leadership programs indicated that they strictly followed the ELCC guidelines in designing their practicum activities. Candidates' practicum activities were reported to cover "as many leadership type experiences as possible". Some programs also identified "multiple activities plus year long action research projects".

TRACKING OF PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS

The best approach of assessing program effectiveness is by way of tracking on the satisfaction and success of program graduates. Most programs achieved this by delivering surveys directly to graduates through e-mailing and regular mailing methods. One program indicated that tracking of graduates had not started but expressed strong interest in pursuing its effort to catch up with the other programs. Additionally, as indicated by a coordinator, "surveys are sent to various superintendents seeking feedback regarding effectiveness of program".

EFFICIENCY OF PROGRAM DELIVERY

Because of the complexity of the practicum program, it is difficult to fairly measure the efficiency of each program without having sufficient information. Factors like "supervisors' travel distance" and "number of school systems served" could impact program efficiency. However, no specific data were collected that indicated detailed

involvement of these factors in the practicum delivery process. Therefore, "supervisors' travel distance" and "number of school systems served" were not included in the efficiency equation constructed to calculate program efficiency. Based on the assessed number of candidates served, the percentage of time in practicum, and the number of full-time equivalent faculty count, a practicum efficiency equation was formulated as follows:

$$\text{Practicum Efficiency} = \{(TMC \ \ X \ \ SIP) + (TAC \ \ X \ \ SIP)\} \ \ X \ \ 1/FTEF$$

The terminology in this equation is defined in the following:

Practicum Efficiency = Practicum Candidate-Semester Per Full-Time Equivalent Faculty

Total Master Candidate (TMC) = The total number of candidates enrolled in M.Ed. Program

Total Add-On Candidate (TAC) = The total number of candidates enrolled in Add-On Program

Semesters in Practicum (SIP) = Number of semesters required of a candidate to be enrolled in practicum

Faculty Full-Time Equivalent (FFTE) = Number of Full-Time Faculty + ½(Number of Part-Time Faculty)

Of the eight participating programs, only seven provided sufficient data to fit into the equation for calculation. As a result of the analysis, the practicum efficiency indexes of Program 1, Program 2, Program 3, Program 4, Program 5, Program 6, and Program 7 were 9.0, 3.0, 7.06, 1.4, 8.8, 9.2, and 6.06 respectively. What it means is each full-time equivalent faculty supervised an average of 9 practicum candidates per cohort in Program 1, 3 practicum candidates per cohort in Program 2, 7.06 practicum candidates per cohort in Program 3, 1.4 practicum candidates per cohort in Program 4, 8.8 practicum candidates per cohort in Program 5, 9.2 practicum candidates per cohort in Program 6, and 6.06 practicum candidates per cohort in Program 7. Results of the analysis clearly showed that Program 1 (9), Program 5 (8.8), and Program 6 (9.2) were most efficient in the use of their faculty resources in delivering their practicum.

DISCUSSION

Results of this study are rich and significant. Not only do they confirm the findings of previous studies, but they also point at new directions for future investigation. The following is a summary discussion of the findings:

1. Findings in this study indicated that most educational leadership programs at the Masters' and Add-On level in Georgia required candidates to enroll in field experiences for two to three semesters. This is actually moving toward the direction of dividing the leadership field experiences by stages as initiated by Hall and Lutz (1989), Pautler (1991), and Restine (1990).
2. One educational leadership program in Georgia reported the involvement of the school board in selecting field mentors for the M.Ed. and Add-On Program candidates. This is part of the school and university partnership as recommended by Williamson and Hudson (2001) who advocated for school and university working together to recognize the complexity and significance of principalship.
3. Cordeiro and Smith-Sloan (1995) focused on reflection as an integral part of the internship activities of the educational leadership program. The finding of this study that all programs stressed the importance of reflection on logged activities is in agreement with Cordeiro and Smith-Sloan.
4. Several educational leadership programs in this study involved action research as a significant component of effective practicum activities. This confirms the work of Jones and Blendinger (1997) who claimed that action research served an important function in preparing future school administrators.

5. The effectiveness of field experiences in educational leadership is difficult to assess. Studies by Chance (1990) and White and Crow (1993) relied on self-perception of candidates to assess program effectiveness. Almost all the educational leadership programs in this study also indicated that they surveyed their graduates to assess the effectiveness of their practicum experiences. However, observing beginning school administrators at work can provide an alternative approach to more solidly assess program effectiveness.

6. Results of this study showed that an average of 57.89% of full time faculty and 45.8% of part time faculty were involved in supervising candidates enrolled in educational leadership field experiences. In some of the programs involving large number of candidates, a much higher percentage of faculty involvement was documented. This is a strong indication that providing educational leadership field experiences is burdensome and time consuming. A more innovative approach to providing educational leadership field experiences has yet to be developed.

7. One educational leadership program reported serving candidates from 40 school systems. Another program reported serving some candidates over 120 miles from university campus. The number of school systems to be covered and the distance university supervisors need to travel complicate the process of designing effective field experiences for educational leadership candidates.

8. The findings of this study continuously reinforce the notion that the school principal played a key role in the success of educational leadership mentees. This is in agreement with the work of Williamson and Hudson (2001). However, because of their busy schedule, many school principals delegate their mentor responsibilities to their assistants who do not have the overall picture of the principalship.

9. It is surprising to find in this study that only three educational leadership programs provide training sessions for their field mentors. While much has been said about the importance of field mentors' contribution to the success of field experiences, most programs do not have yet in place an organized preparation session to clearly define mentor responsibilities and university supervisor and school mentor collaboration (Wilmore & Bratlien, 2005). In reality, it is sometimes very difficult for a school principal to leave their schools to go attend a training session of field experiences. Other alternative training sessions need to be considered.

10. All the programs responded that they have developed some field experience activity guidelines based on the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) Standards. Some programs took further steps by developing the guidelines into handbooks for use by supervisors, mentors and mentees. This has proved to be very successful in serving as the backbone of the internship program.

11. Another strength of the field experience activities was the offering of seminars that candidates enrolled in the educational leadership program could attend. All leadership programs indicated that their seminars were organized to challenge candidates with real leadership cases in the field. The seminars also provide good opportunities for field experience participants to share what they actually learned in the field.

12. Program efficiency is usually interpreted as the best use of resources to achieve the maximum effectiveness. In this study, only human resources were considered in the efficiency count. Future studies need to include other resource factors such as public school support, technology availability, and program fiscal allotments.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Candidates' practicum experiences in an educational leadership program are designed to include assorted activities that summarize the learning outcomes of the entire program. They are planned to provide ample opportunities for candidates to field-witness what they learn in class. Coordinating practicum experiences involves a great deal of work: setting goals and objectives, seeking appropriate school sites, soliciting administrators' assistance, assigning candidates to their corresponding schools, training school administrators to serve as mentors, supervising candidates' course activities, and evaluating candidates' and program outcomes. Findings in this study fully substantiate that program coordinators have tried their best in achieving the maximum program effectiveness by making full use of limited resources. Despite all the constructive efforts, future development of field experiences of educational leadership programs can be enhanced by following the recommended directions below:

Practical Course Assignments.   Each course offered in the educational leadership program is designed with practical assignments for candidates to complete in association with real situations in school. This will allow

candidates to attain immediate feedback from field mentors before the course is over. Candidates should be allowed to log in their time spent to complete these assignments as part of the practicum hours.

Specific Tasks or Projects.   Specific tasks need to be clearly outlined for candidates to work on as part of their field experiences. Candidates' involvement in special projects needs to be agreed by both university supervisors and field mentors. Leaving the arrangement between mentors and mentees to work on tasks that happened to come up in school is not an effective approach to leadership field experiences.

Mandatory Practicum Seminars.   Practicum seminars have proved to be so successfully conducted that candidates expressed their enjoyable learning experiences in a free sharing environment. Practicum seminar attendance should be made mandatory. Candidates should continue to be challenged by real cases in which they have an opportunity to explore the different perspectives. As Creighten (2001), said, aspiring administrators should be taught "what principals will do instead of might do".

Full-time Internship.   Full-time internship for educational leadership program candidates has been practiced in some states with success. Study by Bradshaw, Perreault, McDowelle, and Bell (1997) verified that full-time field experience candidates were better prepared as school principals than part-time candidates. Educational leadership programs offering full-time internship choose to work with school systems to allow released time for candidates to assume full administrator responsibilities. In these cases, funding support is needed to pay for class substitution. School systems in contract with universities to prepare their future administrators are likely to support full-time internship experiences for their employees.

Beginning Administrators' Mentoring Program (BAMP).   Beginning Administrators' Mentoring Program will ensure the success of first year school administrators. However, the fact is when university faculty has been so overwhelmed with work, little time can be allotted to follow up with the administrative performance of program graduates. In some universities, grants have supported the Beginning Administrators' Mentoring Programs. The implementation of BAMP as a regular program of a university remains as a goal to be achieved.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

J. Eric Tubbs, author, is Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership in the Bagwell College of Education at Kennesaw State University. He is a former high school and middle school principal. He has leadership experience in state government, private industry and business. Dr. Tubbs received his B. S. degree from The University of Akron, M. A. from California State University, Los Angeles, Ed. S. from Converse College, and obtained his Ed. D. in Educational Leadership from The University of Sarasota Florida. Dr. Tubbs has additional specialized training in school improvement, curriculum and instruction, the superintendency, quantitative research, and other areas of leadership. Dr. Tubbs also served as graduate field experience program coordinator for the Department of Educational Leadership.

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