

Perceptions of the Induction Process of Intern Principals in a Large Urban School District

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Abstract: This study presents perceptions of principals in a leadership induction program in a large urban school district in the southeastern United States. Qualitative research procedures were used to document experiences of principals. Theoretical constructs guiding the study were professional socialization, organizational socialization, and instructional leadership.

Every organization has certain procedural induction norms that are used to define success. Educational institutions are no different in having normative procedures that serve as a guide to leadership development, selection and induction programs. In Southeastern Public School District (SPSD, pseudonym), the selection process of intern principal candidates employs a practice that ranges from internal searches, resumes used to identify and narrow the pool of prospective candidates, referrals, vacancies advertised via news venues, and recruitment in other cities and states. Selection procedures include reference checks and other means of gathering information about the candidate that provide a work related history which includes the candidate's background education, training, and experience. Structured interviews provide personal information about the candidate such as maturity, commitment, and motivation to become an administrator (Normore, 2004a; Rebores, 2001). The selection process is designed by the organization to ensure the selection of the best candidate to fill the administrative vacancy (Pounder & Merrill, 2001). The National Association of Elementary School Principals and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (2001) and Normore (2006, 2004b) support districts' efforts to enhance leadership preparation, training, induction and advancement of candidates as potential leaders from all levels (elementary, middle and high schools).

Method

Qualitative research procedures were used to gather and analyze data for this study. A purposive sample of participants was utilized to identify and select candidates from an intact SPSPD 2001-2003 intern leadership-training group. The targeted population included 44 participants who entered the program in 2001-2003: 11 Black females, 3 Black males, 20 White females, 6 White males, 1 Hispanic female and 2 Hispanic males, and 1 Multi-racial female, offering a multiethnic and diverse population. At the time of this study, 18 have been appointed to principalships and 26 still remained un-appointed as of September 2005. The candidates reported having had experience varying from 4 to 11 years on the job experience in the role of assistant principal prior to their acceptance into the intern principal program. Multiple qualitative techniques—document review, open-ended survey/questionnaire and a semi-structured focus group interview (see Patton, 2002) were employed to gather information from the subjects allowing them the opportunity to elaborate and to share their insights on their experiences as aspiring principals. Twenty-nine participants (13 males, 16 females) completed the survey and six of these were interviewed in a focus group. The data were coded and interpreted; formal and informal indicators of the themes were then extracted. These themes were constructed to verify

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interpretations (Patton, 2002). The data were organized into groups by sources: field-notes, survey, and interview responses. The next step in the qualitative analytical process was to search for and to identify patterns that captured the experiences, feelings, and perceptions as they were described; these patterns were then coded as they related to each question and construct under investigation.

Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework for this study focused on an “*a priori*” set of constructs found in principal leadership preparation literature. These include (a) instructional leadership, (b) professional socialization, and (c) organizational socialization. According to Daresh (2000, 2004) and Normore (2006), effective leadership is one of the most important and possibly the most influential factor of a school’s success. These authors maintain that leadership and quality of leadership that is established by the administrator plays a major role and has a significant impact on the effectiveness of the school and the achievement of its students. They also suggest that the administrator’s role is seen as a caretaker, manager, leader, the person held responsible for all functions within and about the community of the school; the administrator is the one who is held accountable for all that occurs, measurable or not, within the organization that is perceived as the school. Keller (1998) highlights the importance of the principal’s leadership role in his research on the effectiveness of schools and links this role to the school’s success. As it pertains to leadership, the integral relationship that exists among the three constructs focuses on the process of individuals successfully becoming school leaders in school settings. Doyle and Rice (2002) define *instructional leadership* as a leadership framework with focus on a positive, trusting relationship as a coach and mentor with all members of the community. *Professional socialization* as defined by Daresh (2004) and Normore (2004a) involves the process of acquiring leadership knowledge, skills and behaviors necessary to develop and internalize the values and norms needed to form one’s identity as a member of a the profession. *Organizational socialization* has been addressed in principal preparation literature as an integral component of leadership by which a leader learns the skills, knowledge, policies, processes, and priorities required to perform effectively in the role of being a member of the school and district organization (Hart, 1993; Leithwood, Steinbach, & Begley, 1992).

This study examines these constructs and the pivotal roles and function they play in candidates’ preparation for school leadership. Focus is on participants’ perceptions of the program as a way of assessing the effectiveness of the program. According to research, individuals do not function in objectively defined contexts, but label and interpret situations based on their perceptions (Bandura, 1986). Perception allows humans to construct their individual feelings, knowledge and experience based on their unique experiences and to form distinctive and individual knowledge, a fundamental condition of human behavior and learning (Bandura, 1986). Edie (1964) suggests that we experience a perception and its horizon through action rather than explicitly knowing. He adds that in principle, all consciousness is perceptual, even the consciousness of ourselves.

Findings

Research supports the idea that success and failure have different meanings for different individuals and for a rationale for the success or lack of success in accomplishing a goal (Pounder & Merrill, 2001). For this reason, it can be inferred that measures of success and individual perceptions held by the interns in this study are relative to the individually defined value of the particular task or goal. Although the findings suggest that all the interns indicated that becoming a principal was their primary goal for entering the program, they made it very

clear that their success was not all the result of participation in the program but rather a combination of professional socialization, organizational and instructional leadership. Success was not only measured by the act of finally achieving the position of principal; it was described by the participants as measure of their cumulative personal and professional growth and achievement. There was no difference in achieving the goal of principal dependant upon their perception of performance elements, prior abilities, time spent as administrators, and experiences with prior supervising principals held by the interns. They stated after the interviews that time spent in the program was independent of written and espoused perceptions and beliefs. According to Slater (1996), the relationship between beliefs, capabilities, and behaviors is the alignment of self-efficacy and expectations. Among the findings based on survey data, interviews, fieldnotes, and documents are as follows:

Self-motivation. The participants referred to the “inherent drive I exhibited as a worker to be effective administrators,” the “love of my work” and the “satisfaction I felt and the confirmation I received through performing what was seen as the routine transactional administrative tasks.” Participants felt that although they were working towards the successful completion of their intern program and that they planned for a future position as principal, success was experienced every day. As administrators, they had many opportunities to make positive changes that affected their students, the practice of teaching and to build positive relationships among the faculty and staff as a well as within the community.

Instructional leadership. Participants were able to differentiate the organization’s espoused view of instructional leadership and their daily routine. In response to defining perceptions of how the program influenced their success the participants revealed another commonality among the participants. In support of Rebores (2001) and Normore (2006), interns believed their ability to work effectively as leaders depended on the preparation and development they had in prior experiences. They felt that their prior experiences allowed them to master the basic skills and knowledge needed to handle the unpredictable nature of the day-to-day activities that is the routine of leadership positions in schools. The program was unable to meet the participants’ expectations of growing as instructional leaders, resulting in frustration developing among the group. The findings revealed the participants as individuals who were self-motivated, driven to find ways and means to achieve the position of principal.

Inadequate training. The required training and practice by itself experienced during the process of leadership preparation was not sufficient to lead to any feelings of real success. The subjects felt that their years of experience, the time spent practicing as assistant principal before entry into the program, were more influential in determining the degree of perceived success. In answering the question “How do interns define success?” the findings of the study are supported by Daresh (2004) who agreed that successful performance is achieved over a period of time. It was also evident that time spent in practice was a critical factor in determining the individuals’ perception of success based on their performance as well as their ability to achieve a principal position. Some interns simply followed the program and focused on what they described as the development of a limited practical experience and theoretical study, and for them it took more time to achieve success.

Professional socialization. Socialization processes were reported by participants and were experienced through formal activities such as attendance and participation in retreats and the quest for official documentation that was required by the state and the district (state certification requirements). Participants also informal activities described that influenced their perception of success. The interns felt that these activities were the most influential factors that

made a difference in completing their day-to-day hands on tasks required to do a good job. A majority of the interns agreed that the informal activities (attending meetings, interacting with peers, networking with supervisors, having assigned mentors, and having alternative site placements, and observing practicing principals) were vital in developing their skills and knowledge and in providing valued insights into the role of the instructional leader. These activities provided the opportunities for socialization (Leithwood et al, 1992; Normore, 2004a) and in turn helped to define their perception of success in a complex social organization. They also required the participants to develop and demonstrate a set of complex human interpersonal skills among themselves and within the organization.

Self-assessment. The findings indicate that the program intended to provide self-assessment instruments to help interns develop new understandings and awareness of their leadership styles, strength and weaknesses, and to provide opportunities to participate in practice job interviews (Daresh, 2000; Guy, 1985). However, the participants felt that these activities were insufficient due to the limited time assigned for such activities and the lack of expertise available to interpret the assessments. As evidence, one candidate said, “I honestly do not feel that the program made me a better educator. The assessments could have helped if they were interpreted for us. I owe my success today directly to my drive for achievement, my mentors and past principals.”

Inconsistent and unclear expectations. A majority of the participants felt there were no formal processes in place to evaluate the individual’s mastery of the required skills, knowledge or completion of the program. Merely being in the program inferred acquisition of the skills and disposition required of principalship. The candidates referred to informal guidelines that were in place but felt that they were not implemented consistently. For example, the mentoring component was seen as being of value by all. They indicated that there was inconsistency due to the lack of a method in place to ensure a match between intern mentor and needed skill development. These practices are supported by previous research (e.g., Doyle & Rice, 2002; Normore, 2004a). Additionally, all participants felt that the criteria for the intern program, the process set by the county that they believed would lead to principalship, was unclear. The participants reported feelings of frustration because the criteria that was outlined by the county as they perceived it, to be a “fit” to be selected for the intern program, was not congruent with the views of their school site supervisors. Candidates had difficulty meeting that “fit” in the district’s view of what a future leader looked like even though they were recipients of effective evaluations consistently, year after year.

Inherent site switches. Although the interns appreciated the alternative site switch and valued the opportunity offered by the program, switching sites inherently led to more problems due to the fundamental uniqueness of each school site as described by Normore (2006). Also, each intern at an alternative placement was given insufficient time to learn and to adjust to the demands and expectation of the new setting. They felt that their brief visit did not facilitate assimilation and influence their organizational socialization.

By participating in the preparation the interns hoped to develop their skills as intern principals. This opportunity was one of the selling factors that were espoused by the district and the administrative personnel who were in charge of the program. The district’s plan and design was shared with prospective intern candidates through the meetings advertised to attract participants (HMRD Plan, 2003). The interns felt that they were promised opportunities to develop their skills and to be socialized as principals. In theory the participants believed that the

district's written and espoused induction plan and design met their perceived expectations, but they perceived the program as having contributed minimally to their success as leaders.

Conclusions and Implications

The findings of this study revealed that a better understanding of leadership could be fostered through induction processes of school leaders involved in professional development if, from the outset, espoused values and theories-in-use are aligned. In order to be effective, induction programs need to reflect best practices, the congruence of their espoused values and their theories-in-use, and to provide professional and organizational opportunities to develop characteristics consistent with their vision. Since SPSD is focused on developing instructional leadership with a transformational leadership style, it is important to listen to the candidates and to offer program opportunities to foster professional growth and development through mentoring, site shadowing and coaching, clarification of the leader's role, data analysis, curriculum implementation and student achievement. Schmuck (1971) states that norms and consistency afford the organization and the individual a common set of expectations, reasoning, attitudes, and the understanding of purpose that guides their dispositions and behaviors. Slater (1996) adds that the relationship among beliefs, capabilities, and behaviors is the alignment between self-efficacy and expectations. Therefore, to be effective, individuals and organizations must align their actions, expectations, and beliefs if goals are to be achieved. The data in this study confirmed that individual participants needed to develop a fit into their environment, to develop "a feel for the game" within the organization in order to perceive success. SPSD and other districts have the responsibility to fill leadership positions with personnel who are ready, willing, and able to provide quality service to meet their students' needs.

Policymakers and practitioners can provide and guide a better understanding of aspiring leaders as they are preparing to become successful school leaders of tomorrow. Implications include: (a) Mentoring program personnel need to select assigned mentors based on expertise and candidate needs, (b) Induction programs ought to apply some selection and placement criteria when assigning mentors in induction programs. Once mentors are selected, they should be required to participate in some training or orientation program to ensure that their experiences are aligned to the espoused philosophy and intent of the program, (c) School districts need to implement consistent guidelines and clear expectations to assess and document program mastery, and (d) Leadership development and induction programs ought to employ a constructive two-way feedback system with focused prescriptive interventions. Providing effective feedback opportunities will create opportunities for aspiring leaders to reflect on their experiences, with an emphasis on deeper learning. This could increase consistency in program leadership, mentor selection, and sustainability of the vision and leadership alignment to district goals.

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