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Partnering with Districts in Principal Preparation: Key Program Features in Strengthening Aspiring Principals’ Understanding of Issues of Equity and Excellence

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The need for increased numbers of students of all ethnic groups to access and succeed in postsecondary education is a 21st century reality (Swail, Cabrera, & Lee, 2004). As Swail, Cabrera et al. (2004) reported,

The act of going to college and earning a degree is more important than ever to today’s youth and our society. . . . Unfortunately, access to a postsecondary education is not equal in America. Students historically underrepresented at the postsecondary level – students of color, those from low-income backgrounds, and first-generation students- are still less likely to prepare for, apply for, enroll in, and persist through postsecondary education. (p. iv)

For example, Latinos are one of the fastest growing ethnic groups, but only 19% of Latinos have completed an associate’s or higher degree (Excelencia in Education, 2010). While the number of Latinos accessing college is growing, a disparity still exists between minority group enrollment in college and white student enrollment (Swail et al., 2004). The principal has a key role in schools of creating the conditions wherein all students can be successful and access the next step of postsecondary education whether through a community college, a technical program, the military, or a university (Kaser & Halbert, 2009). As Kaser and Halbert (2009) stated, “Leadership creates the conditions in schools where all learners grow, progress, graduate, go on to some form of postsecondary learning and lead productive lives” (p. 20). Educational leaders can play key roles in advocacy for student success, recognizing inequities where they exist and working to overcome the inequities (Anderson, 2009; Papa & English, 2011).

Just as leaders establish the conditions that foster success in schools (Bellamy, Fulmer, Murphy, & Muth, 2007), educational leadership preparation programs establish the conditions that foster leadership development through the program design and delivery (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007). Leadership development can be enhanced through school-university partnerships (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). In preparing leaders equipped with the knowledge and skills to address issues of equity and excellence, Nunez and Oliva (2009) maintained,

It appears that addressing entrenched community problems, such as those about college access, requires new approaches to collaboration that involve creating cultural norms that

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are neither K-12 nor higher education, but something else – some sort of third perspective and organizational culture that is co-created by multiple stakeholders in multiple and disparate contexts. (p. 3)

Universities have been criticized as lacking currency in preparing educational leaders who are equipped with the knowledge and skills to meet the needs of diverse student bodies (O’Neill, Fry, Hill, & Bottoms, 2003). Studies that identify ways that university programs foster leadership development to meet all students’ needs are limited; exemplars are needed (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005).

Purpose of the Study

Beginning in 2011, an Educational Leadership Principal Preparation Program at a regional university partnered with two districts with a primary goal of producing principal program graduates who have the leadership capacity to support each PK-12 student’s academic success which includes appropriate preparation for ensuring students’ access and success in postsecondary education. This aspiring principals’ program was a new initiative that built upon other university-district partnership initiatives of this Principal Preparation Program that were developed during the last ten years to strengthen the academic preparation of all students as leaders for equity and excellence. A central goal of this initiative was to eliminate inequitable practices and processes by focusing on the preparation of aspiring principals as part of a university preparation program that would sustain and enhance campus initiatives to meet the academic needs of English learners and to strengthen a college-going culture in schools. The purpose of this study was to identify key features of this school university partnership in the preparation of aspiring principals as leaders for equity and excellence.

Conceptual Framework

As a foundation for this study, the current roles of school leaders, benefits of school-university partnerships in leadership development, and action research as a tool for leadership development were explored. Through this investigatory process, the faculty at the university level as well as the school district were impacted.

Current Roles of School Leaders

Educational leaders for social justice recognize their roles in creating the conditions for success for all students of all ethnic groups and income levels (Papa & English, 2011). For too long, a culture of high expectations has not prevailed in all schools, and mindsets of the importance of effort to success have not prevailed (Kaser & Halbert, 2009). However, as Kaser and Halbert (2009) pointed out, “Our strongest leaders are working hard to close any gaps in performance and are deeply concerned about the needs of their most vulnerable learners” (p. 35). Educational leaders who promote the academic success of all students establish structures for collaborative planning of engaging instruction in all classes while also planning and implementing support systems for student success (Papa & English, 2011). They engage parents and other community members as partners in promoting the academic success of all students (Anderson, 2009). They value cultural differences and provide respect for each individual (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell,

2003). They serve as moral and ethical leaders who model principles of equity and excellence in exemplifying as Starratt (2004) suggested the virtues of responsibility, presence and authenticity. They establish collaborative cultures wherein trust and professionalism are nurtured and learning for all is a reality (Knight, 2011). In short, they make key differences in students' lives by promoting and modeling learning and professional development on an ongoing basis.

Benefits of School-University Partnerships in Leader Preparation

As Jacobson, Orr, and Young (2008) identified, "Through joint effort and informed action, preparation programs and districts can improve the quality and effectiveness of school leaders for the schools (and students) who need effective leadership most" (p. 2). In achieving high student performance for historically underserved student populations, interventions to provide enhanced opportunities to learn and support systems for success are crucial (Contreras, 2010). Preparation programs are needed that provide "future leaders with high-quality training and internships that reflect the realities education leaders face in the field" (The Wallace Foundation, 2012, p. 14). For, as Young (2009) emphasized, "We know leadership matters" (p. 2).

School principals are in the unique position to influence hiring practices, the quality of instruction, and levels of student support that can contribute to greater student success (Knight, 2011; Reinhartz & Beach, 2004). As Hambrick Hitt, Tucker, and Young (2012) stressed, "Given the sweeping influences of effective educational leadership, our schools, teachers, children, and communities deserve highly qualified, rigorously prepared leaders" (p. 1). School-university partnerships provide ways to strengthen principal leadership preparation (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Hambrick Hitt et al., 2012). Problem-based learning strategies, such as, action research "link classroom learning and educational theory with the practice of leadership in the local school setting" (Holter & Frabutt, 2012, p. 255). As educational leaders, action research is a powerful professional development process for school improvement (Knight, 2011).

Action Research as an Improvement Tool

While Johnson (2008) defined action research as a "planned methodical observation related to one's teaching" (p. 29), Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (1994) emphasized their hope that practitioner researchers would be viewed as "critical change agents within their school" (p. xvii). In their book titled *Studying Your Own School*, practitioners were urged to pose inquiry questions regarding educational practices "using their own site (classroom, institution, school district, community) as the focus of their study" (p. 2). This broader definition included research to understand problems of practice in multiple contexts as well as in an individual's classroom.

As stated by Stringer (2007), action research is defined as "a systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives" (p. 1). Although there are many reasons to conduct action research, educators tend to use the research for school improvement purposes such as instructional practices, curriculum, behavioral issues, and professional development (Johnson, 2011). Thus, practitioners, such as teachers, counselors, administrators and other school stakeholders, use action research to investigate and determine best practices, which will improve student learning and achievement for all (Goldys, Krufft, & Subrizi, 2007; Hendricks, 2006; Johnson, 2011).

Additionally, educators may use the action research to collaborate with others and develop their own personal growth while recognizing that there are barriers and benefits to action research as a school improvement process (Johnson, 2011).

Barriers to action research. When conducting action research, there will be barriers that exist. Although time is the largest concern, other concerns include lack of resources, difficulty formulating research questions, personnel resistance to change, and additional questions or concerns related to the use of human subjects (Hansen & Brady, 2011; Johnson, 2011). Calhoun (2002) concurred that time is a barrier stating, “It’s a challenging task to help staff structure action research into their work and the work of the organization” (p. 24). However, both Johnson (2011) and Calhoun (2002) agreed that the benefits of the action research were well worth the time spent overcoming the barriers. Not only does action research provide one with professional expertise in a particular area, but it also offers information to ensure academic success for all students (Johnson, 2011).

Benefits of action research. Gilles, Wilson, and Elias (2010) concluded that action research was a powerful agent for change. They contributed the ongoing success of the action research to several factors. First, the principals valued and supported the process of the action research. Furthermore, the induction program paired with the action research provided a unique collaboration of all teachers. Gilles et al.(2010) indicated, “As trust deepened among teachers, they shared more research practices that informed their teaching” (p. 103). Studies have shown that inquiry and reflection are a huge component of successful action research projects (Calhoun, 2002; Holter & Frabutt, 2012; Johnson, 2011).

Collaborative action research between school teachers and university faculty could provide significant information regarding real life situations. West (2011) described how university faculty could provide expertise in the field of research. In turn, the teachers would become more proficient in their inquiry process and add to the body of knowledge in their field of study. If administrators or teachers are not research savvy, Calhoun (2002) agreed that university faculty could provide research assistance. Miskovic, Efron, and Ravid (2012) found that the school teachers often needed “a sounding board, practical suggestions, and reassurance that what they were doing was indeed a legitimate action research” (p. 10).

As university faculty, it is important to construct learning opportunities that involve action research to allow teachers and future administrators to gain meaningful knowledge and enhance their professional practice to ensure success for all students (Miskovic, Efron, & Ravid, 2012). According to Gilles et al. (2010), “Grass-roots classroom research within a university induction school-partnership is a powerful agent for change” (p. 104). As issues, problems, or particular practices are studied over-time, the information gained can be used to improve practice. As Anderson (2009) stressed, “Part of the task of practitioner research is to strip away the unexamined theoretical baggage that has accumulated around almost everything we do in schools” (p. 5). In short, practitioners can solve the more difficult educational problems through action research which can be used as a tool for fostering social justice to eliminate inequities in schools.

Methodology

A principal preparation program partnered with school districts in preparing aspiring principals who would have the knowledge and skills to foster conditions in schools to (a) ensure success for English learners and (b) to strengthen a college-going culture. Two U.S. Department of Education grants served as support for the aspiring principals' program. One of the grants primarily focused on preparing educators to more fully meet the needs of English learners while the second grant primarily focused on increasing the number of students from traditionally underrepresented groups accessing and succeeding in postsecondary education. A key component of each of the grants was an emphasis on achieving equity and excellence for all students. In 2011, these two partnership grants were funded and included an aspiring principals' program in order to enhance leadership development within the districts, sustain the partnership efforts, and continue the increased focus on equity and excellence for all students.

This qualitative study was designed to identify key features of the school-university partnership in preparing the aspiring principals to meet the needs of English learners and of increasing the preparation of all students for postsecondary education. Specifically, the research question was, "What were key features of the school-university partnership in principal preparation that most impacted students' understanding of their role as advocates for equity and excellence?"

Data sources included focus group interviews, open-ended aspiring principals' response surveys, action research projects, and course observations. Four focus group interviews were conducted with approximately seven students in each focus group. Forty-five aspiring principals were also surveyed with open response questions from two cohorts, and forty-two action research projects were reviewed as further data sources. Field notes from course sessions over a two-year period for two different cohorts were another source of data.

Data from interviews were transcribed and analyzed to discern themes through open and axial coding (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Merriam, 2009). Trustworthiness of the data was maintained through peer debriefing, member checks, and an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All data were maintained in a secure cabinet in the co-researchers' offices. All data were considered in presenting the findings through the key themes that emerged (Creswell, 2009).

Findings

The aspiring principals identified action research projects focused on issues of equity and academic excellence, a cohort design, panel presentations by principals in the field, and requirements of service on data teams as the key features of the school university aspiring principals' program that most impacted their development as leaders for equity and excellence in partner schools. The students also identified benefits of each of these program features.

Students identified that a key feature of the school university aspiring principals' program was the assignment of action research to address issues of equity and excellence in meeting needs of English learners and in increasing the preparation and access of all students for postsecondary education. Practical benefits of the action research projects were shared, such as, gaining information to advocate for dual language classes at the pre-K level, understanding ways to

prevent drop-outs, and understanding ways to prepare more students for postsecondary education. Examples of actions taken included starting a mentor program, sharing English learner strategies with the entire campus, and implementing technology to provide more student engagement. Writing the action research projects was referred to as “stressful” in that, for many students, it was their first experience in writing using the APA format for citations. However, all agreed that the process was helpful in accessing data and providing “an avenue to be proactive to see changes to meet the needs of all students.” Although participants shared that writing the action research literature review was “really hard work,” the action research project assisted in studying the effectiveness of practices to ensure equity and excellence. As a student explained, “The action research helps you as a leader to be able to go back and implement what you learned.”

Another key feature of the design of the school-university aspiring principals’ program that was identified by students included a cohort face to face model of course delivery. Benefits of the power of the cohort design in forming a network that provided support were repeatedly shared. The students voiced the long-term benefits of the cohort experience in identifying individuals at multiple levels of elementary, middle, and high school who would remain a support even when the preparation program ended. The diversity of grade levels in the cohort was beneficial. A representative comment was, “I’m at the primary level, and I had no idea what was going on at the high school level. I’ve learned a lot from this cohort.” As a student shared, “I have learned so much from different people in this program. They have given me insight, feedback, and support.” Several students referred to the cohort through the metaphor of a family. As a student explained, “It almost feels like you are a family because you do care for each other, and you want everybody to succeed and finish.”

A third key feature of the school-university aspiring principals’ program identified by the students was the inclusion of multiple panel discussions by practicing exemplary principals who addressed issues specifically related to the principal’s role as a leader for equity and excellence and an advocate for each student’s academic success. The students also cited benefits of the panel presentations by practicing principals as helping them hear authentic “real-life situations.” That the panels were diverse was pointed out as a particular benefit in helping the students to see how leaders met challenges in different contexts. However, participants were also impressed that all panelists discussed the importance of making decisions based on “what’s best for students.”

A fourth key feature of the school university aspiring principals’ program identified by the students was the requirement that they participate in school data teams. Understanding ways to disaggregate the data was cited as very useful. As a student shared, “Before, the charts were just numbers, but now I actually understand the data, and I am able to serve as a leader for my grade level.” The school data teams included faculty members as representatives on campus data teams, and participants expressed benefits of this joint collaboration in strengthening attainment of multiple perspectives. The data teams focused on targeted English learners’ academic success as well as on monitoring advanced course selection and support processes to ensure that students from traditionally underrepresented groups were being encouraged to participate and succeed in advanced placement and dual credit courses. Repeatedly, participants discussed that they grew in their ability to “see the big picture.” Instead of viewing information at a classroom level, for

example, school-wide data helped them to see needs across grade levels. They gained a “campus view” and in doing so, were able to discern “critical needs” of the campus.

Conclusion

This study examined a redesigned principal preparation program that used a targeted action research project assignment as a vehicle for aspiring principals to delve deeply into issues of equity and excellence. Studying practices to prepare more students to access and succeed in postsecondary education and to prepare more teachers to specifically meet the needs of English learners were topics selected by students. Particularly, action research on these issues of equity and excellence deepened students’ knowledge and skills as leaders of social justice and served as a powerful tool in the process of school improvement.

Faculty members considered, “Would entire cohorts have selected topics pertinent to meeting needs of English learners or of fostering a college-going culture to enhance the preparation of all for postsecondary education without the explicit assignment of these broad topics for action research projects to address?” Having taught in a principal preparation program for multiple years, our experience suggested that the students’ selected topics would have been much more diverse and generic if the assignment had not focused on these issues of social justice. In reading the action research projects, a key benefit of the projects was the depth of investigation through the literature review that was required as a component of the project. Requiring a thorough investigation of the topics stretched students to consider deeply explicit needs for principal leadership as advocates for equity and excellence in schools. Investigation of social justice issues as a vital part of principal preparation was enhanced through the specific nature of this assignment. In addition, the cohort design provided an effective instructional mode for in-depth discussion of topics pertinent to leadership for equity and excellence. Further, the practicing principals who served as resources for class sessions raised issues related to leadership for equity and excellence and fostered deepened analysis of the principal’s role as an instructional leader for all students. Campus field experiences of analyzing data pertinent to issues of equity and excellence further developed the students’ understanding of social justice.

School leaders are needed who will advocate for all learners and seek ways to meet the needs of all learners in order for them to succeed to optimal levels (Anderson, 2009; Papa & English, 2011). As the demographics in the U.S. continues to diversify, school leaders who understand deeply ways to meet needs of English learners are needed. In turn, in response to changing needs in the workforce in an increasingly global economy, principals who can foster a college-going culture and implement ways to prepare students more fully for postsecondary education are also essential.

This study supported that school-university partnerships can prove beneficial in principal preparation to meet these current needs. The focused action research, cohort design, panel presentations and opportunities for dialogue with outstanding practicing principals, and data analysis team participation were all beneficial program features.

Benefits of a school-university partnership in preparing aspiring principals who have the knowledge and skills to sustain and strengthen a college-going culture in schools and meet the

needs of all learners including the English learners were identified. Without explicit attention to issues of social justice, inequities in the academic preparation of students will continue (Papa & English, 2011). Leadership matters (Leithwood, Seashore, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004), and preparing aspiring principals to better meet the needs required in the 21st century are essential (Young, Crow, Murphy, & Ogawa, 2009). This study illuminated key features of a school-university partnership that can assist in reaching this goal.

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