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Neil Faulk
Lamar University, nfaulk@lamar.edu

Thomas Harvey
Lamar University, tharvey@lamar.edu

Brett Welch
Lamar University, bwelch5@lamar.edu

Gary E. Martin
Lamar University, gary.martin@lamar.edu

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A Comparative Analysis of the Impact of University Field Supervision on Administrative Mindsets: Considerations for Redesign

Neil Faulk
Lamar University

Thomas Harvey
Lamar University

Brett Welch
Lamar University

Gary E. Martin
Lamar University

The route that educators travel to attain certification as a principal has evolved over time. Kaplan and Owings (2015) explained that technological advancements and societal changes have made the job of the principal more complex. An example of this complexity includes the recent COVID-19 pandemic which was a catalyst for redesign and amending practices in educator preparation programs. The redesign is not only in curriculum and experiences required of principal candidates but also in the means or methods of instruction, field supervision, and practicum activities including professional coaching received by principal candidates within principal preparation programs. In the spring of 2020, educator preparation programs in Texas were granted permission to design programs that reduced clinical internship and practicum assignments up to 20% during the declared disaster associated with COVID-19. Additionally, the Texas State Board of Educator Certification (SBEC) provided flexibility that allowed for asynchronous field supervision observations (19 Texas Administrative Code §228.1 d).

Principal preparation programs are typically paired with a Master of Educational Leadership program in which courses and field experiences allow candidates to prepare for certification. Many states require a form of leadership proficiency examination that validates or measures the potential school leaders' performance in key areas (knowledge, skills, and mindsets) that are aligned with state and national standards.

A notable and evolving change in school leadership programs has been the method of delivery of the certification and master's degree programs. In the past, all programs were face-to-face, and courses and experiences required the candidates to be physically present at some site, which was usually a university campus. Recent years have witnessed the tremendous growth of online graduate programs including online school leadership certification programs and online master's degree programs in teacher education and educational leadership (Hilliard & Jackson, 2016). Even though recent years have witnessed tremendous growth in online principal preparation

programs, there appears to be little comparison of the quality of online principal preparation programs with traditional face-to-face principal preparation programs.

This study explored the phenomena of principal preparation program candidates' perceptions regarding the impact professional coaching and field supervision had on developing administrative mindsets. A secondary purpose was to determine if there was a significant difference in perceptions regarding the impact that professional coaching and field supervision had on administrative mindsets when comparing students who received grant sponsored face-to-face field supervision and coaching activities to those involved in online-only field supervision and coaching activities.

Review of Literature

During the COVID-19 crisis, the Texas Education Agency (2020) provided specific guidance to the Texas Directors of Field Experiences. The agency affirmed that even in virtual or online settings, student candidates in educator preparation programs needed to demonstrate proficiency in adopted state standards. This would require support from field supervisors and campus mentors. Field supervisors needed to be able to observe synchronous or asynchronous (online) activities, monitor candidate performance, and provide quality, timely, and constructive feedback.

The quality of principal preparation programs has taken on heightened significance (Hess & Kelly, 2005). In most principal preparation programs, the principal internship along with its field experiences is both a capstone endeavor and the beginning of a new role in educational leadership. An important aspect of the internship is the feedback that university supervisors, mentors, and peers provide principal candidates (Martin, 2017).

An engaging internship is critical to principal preparation because students gain knowledge of school leadership and have an opportunity to build professional relationships (Figueiredo-Brown, Ringler & James, 2015). Field experiences attached to principal internships in Texas must be supervised by an experienced educator who has been trained as a field supervisor. Field supervisors in Texas' principal preparation programs must formally observe each candidate for a minimum of 135 minutes throughout the practicum. These field supervisors lead individualized post observation conferences with candidates after each formal observation. Candidates receive feedback and professional coaching through an individualized, synchronous, and interactive post-observation conferences (19 Texas Education Code, §228.35(h)).

Taylor-Backor (2013) found there to be undisputed value in the supervised field experience component of principal preparation programs. However, questions remain on the benefits and challenges of both the online and face-to-face modalities. Research (Nicks, et al. 2018) points out that the traditional face-to-face internship for principals and the online model differ in structure, delivery, and practice. However, both deliveries have critical elements important to a successful internship experience. Consequently, it appears important for principal preparation

programs to seek feedback that identifies those critical elements from students prior to the development or redesign of the internship experience. Stones-Johnson and Miles (2020) suggested that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, principals would meet more challenges in the area of assessing professionalism. Results showed that amidst the shutdowns and movement to virtual school environments, principals needed to exert more professionalism over their worksites (Stones-Johnson & Miles, 2020).

Methods and Procedures

This study surveyed, examined, and analyzed student perceptions regarding university field supervision of principal candidates within an educator preparation program in Texas. Specifically, it reviewed perceptions regarding the impact that field supervision had on the development of candidate administrative mindsets. These mindsets (professional demonstrated beliefs) are identified within curriculum pillars required in principal preparation programs in Texas. The curriculum pillars are built around aligned knowledge, skills, and mindsets. (Texas Education Agency, 2018) To garner a wide understanding of student perspectives a mixed method of data retrieval was used.

The population for this study consisted of one-hundred fifty principal preparation students within an online master's degree program of Educational Leadership and a Principal Certification program at a regional university in south Texas. Since the study attempted to measure and compare perceptions of field experiences in the practicum component of this principal preparation program, it is important to note that all candidates surveyed were actively engaged in field experiences. All students surveyed completed state and university required field supervision and professional coaching activities. Sixty-one of those surveyed responded for a return rate of forty-one percent. Thirty-four of the respondents received field supervision requirements for certification completely online. Twenty-seven respondents were exposed to an additional, deliberate, and robust grant sponsored face-to-face field supervised experience led by a university field supervisor. These twenty-seven respondents were part of a principal residency grant program sponsored by the Texas Education Agency. The university led face-to-face supervision was a component of the grant. The grant activities included university supervision during field-based activities and subsequent one-on-one face-to-face conferences.

The purpose of the survey was to gather data regarding student perceptions of the impact that field supervision activities had on their administrative mindsets. The survey itself was composed of 28 Likert scale items that ranged from a score of 1 to 5. The score of 1 was denoted by an explanation of Strongly Disagree while the score of 5 was denoted by an explanation of Strongly Agree. Likewise, scores of 2 and 4 were denoted by an explanation of Disagree and Agree respectively. A score of 3 was denoted as being Neutral. The survey was worded in a manner that described affirmative positive statements regarding the field experience component of the program. The survey used subscales that matched the nine Principal as Instructional Leader Pillars developed and used by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) in its review and approval of

principal preparation programs. These pillars prescribed requirements in the Texas Administrative Code and included communication with stakeholders, curriculum alignment, diversity and equity, data-driven instruction, hiring selection and retention, observation and feedback, professional development, school vision and culture, and strategic problem-solving (19 TAC §241.41). Within each curriculum pillar, knowledge, skills, and mindsets were aligned. This study formed its survey items using the mindsets from the pillars identified by TEA. (Texas Education Agency, 2018)

The table below shares a sampling of the mindsets that were measured in the survey. All measured mindsets were tied to the Principal as Instructional Leader Pillar (identified as a subscale in the findings).

Table 1
Samples of Mindsets Tied to Principal as Instructional Leader Pillars

| <u>Principal as an Instructional Leader Pillar (subscale)</u> | <u>Samples of Mindsets: Candidates demonstrate the belief that.....</u> |
|---|--|
| Communication with Stakeholders | Multiple perspectives are valuable. |
| Curriculum Alignment | Quantifiable, academic outcomes for students are the primary measure of quality instruction. |
| Diversity and Equity | An effective principal accepts and respects all cultural backgrounds, customs, traditions, values, and communication as assets. |
| Data Driven Instruction | Leaders should push teachers to develop a better understanding of why students are not performing well on content that has been taught and what actions are needed. |
| Hiring, Selection, and Retention | Finding, developing, and keeping high quality teachers are the highest leverage actions a principal can take to ensure student achievement. |
| Observation and Feedback | Teachers deserve consistent feedback around their practice to fine tune their skills and improve. |
| Professional Development | The effectiveness of professional development should be measured by effective teacher implementation of the knowledge and skills taught. |
| School Vision and Culture | Effective teaching is the cornerstone of a strong school vision and mission, and therefore have a low tolerance for ineffective teaching. |
| Strategic Problem-Solving | Only effective plans with clear initiatives and responsibilities, that are consistently reviewed and updated throughout the year, lead to improved results for students. |

This survey was deemed to be valid since its items were directly derived from the mindsets located within all nine required domains and associated competencies within the Texas

Education Agency's *Principal as Instructional Leader Pillars: Domains and Competencies with Aligned KSMs* document cited in this research (Texas Education Agency, 2018). Additionally, five school principals and three university professors agreed that the survey would be a valid measure of the required field experience component of a principal preparation program in Texas. Additionally, the survey contained one open-ended question seeking comments regarding what activities/aspects related to field supervision had an impact on candidate growth as an administrator and their administrative mindsets. This phenomenological approach focused on identifying experiences that candidates had in common and explore those experiences by organizing the data into themes (Creswell, 2012). In qualitative research, the data is analyzed to provide "descriptions and themes using text analysis [to] interpret the larger meaning of the findings" (Creswell, 2012, p.16).

Participants were selected using purposeful sampling and the survey was electronically mailed to each of them during the first week of May 2019. Data were analyzed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics were computed along with inferential independent *t* tests to determine if significant mean differences existed between the principal candidates receiving online field supervision (n=34) and the principal candidates who received face-to-face field supervision (n=27). All inferential tests were conducted at the .01 level of confidence in order to increase the likelihood of not making a Type 1 error.

Results and Findings

Twenty-eight Likert scale items were the focus of the survey that was electronically mailed to each of the one-hundred fifty principal candidates enrolled in the field experience component of a principal certification program, either in conjunction with a master's degree program or specifically within a principal certification only program only. The Likert scaled items intended to measure the perceptions of candidates regarding the impact of field supervision and professional coaching from university faculty during field experiences within the practicum required in the preparation program.

Results revealed that principal candidates had very favorable perceptions of the field supervision and professional coaching they received. All twenty-eight items revealed a mean of 4.2 or higher while twenty-seven of the twenty-eight items had a mean of 4.4 or higher. The total mean of the twenty-eight means of the items was 4.65 which indicated positive perceptions of the field experience component in terms of coaching and supervision received from field supervisors employed by the university. One must remember that item scores ranged from 1-5 with 1 being a negative score that strongly disagreed with the affirmative statement of the items and 5 being a very positive score for each item that strongly agreed with the affirmative statement for each item, thus a grand mean of 4.65 for all twenty-eight items was deemed as very positive indeed. Apparently principal candidates had strong positive perceptions regarding consultation and supervision received during the field experience process or component.

Another positive aspect from the findings of the survey was that for the nine subscales of the survey, the means ranged from 4.2 to 4.7 as shown in Table 2. The overall or grand mean for the nine means of the nine subscales was 4.6 which coincided closely with the grand mean of the 28 individual items which was 4.65. This grand mean of 4.6 for the nine subscales is once again very positive in terms of principal candidates' perceptions of the field experience component specifically regarding professional coaching and supervision.

Table 2

Comparison Analysis Examining Subscale Means of Online and Face-to-Face Principal Candidates Regarding the Impact of Field Supervision on Administrative Mindsets

| Pillars (Subscales) | <u>Face-to-Face</u> | | <u>Online Only</u> | | t (59) | p |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|------|--------------------|------|--------|------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | | |
| Communication with Stakeholders | 4.89 | .244 | 4.69 | .417 | 2.36 | .023 |
| Curriculum Alignment | 4.48 | .849 | 4.07 | .851 | 1.92 | .060 |
| Diversity and Equity | 4.89 | .271 | 4.70 | .348 | 2.42 | .021 |
| Data Driven Instruction | 4.72 | .430 | 4.58 | .451 | 1.20 | .233 |
| Hiring Selection Retention | 4.68 | .579 | 4.53 | .381 | 1.24 | .217 |
| Observation and Feedback | 4.75 | .507 | 4.55 | .456 | 1.56 | .122 |
| Professional Development | 4.77 | .320 | 4.51 | .529 | 2.27 | .029 |
| Vision and Culture | 4.79 | .320 | 4.61 | .363 | 2.10 | .039 |
| Strategic Problem Solving | 4.60 | .679 | 4.36 | .609 | 1.44 | .153 |

No significant difference at the .01 level was found between the two groups of principal candidates on the nine analyses.

The second purpose of the study was to determine if a significant difference existed regarding the perception of online field supervision as compared to face-to-face field supervision. As earlier mentioned, one group received online consultation/supervision while the second group received face-to-face consultation/supervision. Independent *t* tests were conducted to analyze potential mean differences for the online consultation group (n=34) and the group receiving grant sponsored face-to-face consultation (n=27). The *t* tests revealed that there was significant difference among means for only six of the twenty-eight items in terms of the two groups. It must be noted that despite differences the effect size was minimal to moderate for all six items that were found to be different for the two groups. Some researchers would report that in 6 of

the 28 items surveyed there was a slight difference. However, an analysis of the effect size negates that notion. It must also be pointed out that there was no significant difference for the remaining twenty-two other items. Independent *t* tests also were conducted on the nine subscales for the two groups. These *t* tests revealed no significant differences for the two groups on any of the nine subscales.

Results from the open-ended question seeking comments regarding what activities/aspects related to field supervision and/or professional coaching had an impact on candidate growth as an administrator and their administrative mindsets yielded three major themes: (1) The use of timely and quality feedback (2) The encouragement of growth (3) The practice of collaborative communication.

The themes identified in the research were derived from the researchers. The themes were uniquely developed using comments from students involved in online field supervision and students involved in the grant sponsored face-to-face field supervision. There were no unique themes to either group of students. The themes were common in both groups. Sample comments can be found below:

Theme 1 - The use of timely and quality feedback

- “The quality feedback administered by my field supervisor on my campus was beneficial to my development as a future instructional leader.”
- “The face-to-face feedback I received from my field supervisor resulted in a positive impact on my growth, experience, and confidence.”
- “My field supervisor provided timely feedback and it was always a positive experience.”
- “The quick candid feedback I received regarding my recorded field experiences provided food for thought.”
- “Since I was in an online learning environment my field supervisor feedback was via the computer but was helpful and relevant to my growth.”
- “Having my field supervisor come to my campus to discuss my progress and give timely feedback was a huge help to me.”

Theme 2 – The encouragement of growth

- “My field supervisor provided constructive criticism but was always encouraging.”
- “My field supervisor challenged me to move outside of my comfort zone and provided encouragement and support during our face-to face conferences.”
- “My field supervisor and I held conferences online. The discussions were pleasant, engaging and encouraging.”
- “My field supervisor provided encouragement to help me along my professional path.”
- “I was encouraged to stay on track when I wanted to give up.”

Theme 3 - The practice of collaborative communication

- “We discussed my progress, shared ideas for success that focused on skills I needed to be an instructional leader.”
- “I loved how I could reach out to our field supervisor to discuss issues.”
- “My field supervisor and I established goals together.”
- “My field supervisor was approachable and easy to talk with.”

Discussion and Conclusions

It should appear rather obvious from the findings that the principal candidates had positive perceptions of the practicum component of the principal preparation program in terms of professional coaching and field supervision received from university faculty. There has been discussion whether the online professional coaching and field supervision within principal preparation programs is on par with the face-to-face professional coaching and field supervision within principal preparation programs. Results from this study refute the notion that there is a significant difference between principal preparation candidate perceptions regarding the impact of online professional coaching and field supervision as compared to face-to-face professional coaching and field supervision within the practicum component of a principal preparation program. Further, it is noted that while there was no significant difference, candidates from both camps, those who were exposed to online and face-to-face field supervision shared that timely and quality feedback had an impact on their administrative mindsets as did the encouragement of growth from their field supervisors and the practice of collaborative communication. It is suggested that these professional practices are more important than if practicum activities and field supervision are conducted face-to-face or online and should be considered during principal preparation program redesign for any reason including crisis.

Timely and Quality Feedback

Ensuring the professional practice of providing timely and quality feedback from university field supervisors requires programs to hire experienced leaders with expertise to assume supervision roles. Providing specific professional development activities for university field supervisors that cover the need for targeted, specific, and timely feedback for candidates increases the probability of impact. Timely feedback infers that the student/field supervisor ratio is of a size that allows for proper engagement within defined time parameters. Fiscal resources to support a proper ratio are imperative.

Encouragement of Growth

As the names and faces of students differ, so do their professional backgrounds and needs. To encourage growth, university field supervisors need an understanding of who they are serving. The provision of individual student data (rich with content including professional and

demographic profiles) to field supervisors will assist with encouragement and coaching efforts. Cookie cutter meetings and feedback devised to merely meet state and program requirements do not effectively encourage growth.

Collaborative Communication

Ongoing collaborative communication requires university field supervisors to be available and open to work with candidates. The student/field supervisor ratio becomes an important consideration in this practice. The commitment of the university field supervisor is paramount. Departmental hiring practices in searches for field supervisors should include methods of assessing the commitment to work with individual candidates.

Limitations and Future Research

This study only surveyed principal candidates and it is obvious that there are more online programs of much different nature and scope. It is however apparent in the literature that there has been little if any empirical research comparing the two mediums of instruction and the two mediums of professional coaching/field supervision that are being utilized. It is recommended that further research be conducted in education and other fields regarding the effectiveness and perceptions of online and face-to-face professional coaching and field supervision being currently utilized. It is also recommended that research be conducted regarding appropriate student/field supervisor ratios.

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