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The Professional Development of Rural School Principals: The Elements, Contexts, and Topics Desired by Principals in a Rural School District

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Cover Page

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Elements, Contexts, and Topics Desired by Principals in a Rural School District

There are a number of different types of professional development programs available to school principals. Not only are professional development activities important to the success of school principals, but have also become a key factor in efforts designed to improve student achievement in of our schools (Miller, Goddard, Kim, Jacob, Goddard, & Schroeder, 2016). Black, Martin, and Danzig (2014) indicate professional development and continuing education programs for principals are necessary to "equip principals with on-going and significant learning that advance education practice" (p. 9). According to Hall and Hord (2011), the role professional development programs serve is vital to the reform process, but often remains ineffective, resulting in limited transfer of knowledge (Barnes, Camburn, Sanders, & Sebastian, 2010; Hall & Hord, 2011).

Professional development activities offered principals are often a hodgepodge of different types of programs designed to foster the sustainability of leadership practices. While professional development is important for the continual improvement of principals, Guskey (2003) describes professional development activities as generally having a history of being ineffective and lacking strong links that positively impact student achievement. The more importance state and district leaders place on the professional development of school principals, the more emphasis the elements, contexts, and topics the principals prefer should be considered. If professional development for principals is to be sustainable, the expectations principals have for their professional development must be considered. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the elements, contexts, and topics of professional development programs provided to principals in a rural school district over the course of a year?

2. What elements, contexts, and topics of professional development programs are desired by principals in a rural school district?

Literature Review

Professional development is vital to the success of school principals. However, while most states provide a program of professional development for beginning principals, overall both beginning and experienced principals may not receive adequate, ongoing professional development designed to address requirements associated with various forms of legislation (Keith, 2011; Silver et al., 2009).

According to Guskey (2003), professional development activities generally have a history of being ineffective and lacking strong links that are necessary to positively impact student achievement. Guskey (2003) further concludes there is a lack of agreement among the researchers and practitioners with regard to the criteria professional development programs must include in order to be effective.

Elements of Professional Development Programs

It is important for professional development to be research-based and presented in a manner that allows the participants to apply the skills learned (LaPointe & Davis, 2006). According to several researchers (LaPointe & Davis, 2006; Rodriguez-Campos, Rincones-Gomez, & Schen, 2005; Salazar, 2007), it is important for professional development to be presented in authentic contexts. This enables the principals participating in professional development to be allowed to develop and apply the new skills in authentic work situations. Those contextual experiences must be research-based and allow for collaboration among the participants in the professional development program and area schools (Guskey, 2003; LaPointe & Davis, 2006). Along these same lines, it is vital that professional development programs

foster the integration of theory and practice (LaPointe & Davis, 2006; Rodriguez-Campos et al., 2005).

Professional development programs require rigorous planning to be successful (Evans & Mohr, 1999; Knapp, 2003). Programs for professional development should be flexible, easy to implement, rigorous, and ongoing (Barth, 1984; Evans & Mohr, 1999; LaPointe & Davis, 2006; Knapp, 2003). Continuous and ongoing professional development is necessary for principals to increase their capacity for knowledge and skills (LaPointe & Davis, 2006; Salazar, 2007). LaPointe and Davis (2006) indicate principals are more likely to visit other schools, participate in a mentoring program, observe, and receive/provide feedback to other administrators if they participate in a program of professional growth.

It is important that administrators be given the opportunity to reflect on the information provided during a program of professional growth, especially as a part of a program that includes coaching and/or mentoring (Reed, 2010). Not only is it important that reflection be built into any professional growth process, providing as many opportunities and ways to reflect as possible provides the administrator with the ability to expand their leadership capacity (Evans & Mohr, 1999).

There must be an element of trust between the developers of the programs for professional growth and the participants in the program (Evans & Mohr, 1999; Knapp, 2003; Reed, 2010; Silver et al., 2009). Trust is essential when colleagues acknowledge their imperfections and lack of knowledge in areas of administrative leadership especially in programs involving coaching and mentoring (Reed, 2010; Silver et al., 2009).

The mission and objectives for effective professional development must be clearly stated (Guskey, 2003). Having a mission and clear objectives on which to focus results in professional development programs maintaining its momentum and sustainability (Guskey, 2003).

Quality professional development programs are structured to promote collegiality and collaboration which will allow principals to benefit from the collaborative experience of the programs (Guskey, 2003; Reed, 2010). Working together, colleagues use their own experiences and strengths in order to provide help others. This improves the overall experience and bolsters the performance of each other (Reed, 2010).

Contexts of Professional Development Programs

While there are several types of programs highlighted in the literature as effective methods of delivery, opinions varied regarding the most effective types of programs (Salazar, 2007). Participation in professional development programs utilizing internships, mentoring, or coaching are very popular types of programs. Administrative certification programs often use internship programs to provide future administrative candidates a glimpse into the job as a school administrator (Hall & Hord, 2008; Silver et al., 2009). LaPointe and Davis (2006) indicate that while it is clear a quality internship program is important in developing leadership skills, there is great debate regarding the types of activities, the timeframe used for participation, and exactly what the structure of the program should include.

Mentoring and coaching are popular methods used for professional development in many programs (Grissom & Harrington, 2010; Hall & Hord, 2008; LaPointe & Davis, 2006; Peterson & Cosner, 2005; Rodriguez-Campos et al., 2005; Silver et al., 2009) In a mixed methods study, Alsbury and Hackmann (2006) determined mentoring and coaching programs met the expectations of the participants and the most important component in the programs was the

development of the mentor-protégé relationship. From the results of another study, Grissom and Harrington (2010) determined principals who participate in mentoring and coaching opportunities perform well in their jobs, while principals who participate in formal principal networks and other types of professional development did not perform as well. Findings of another study regarding a university-based coaching program indicated coaching was a valuable tool used for the professional development of principals (Silver et al., 2009). Job-embedded mentoring and coaching provided important support to principals as they struggled with becoming acclimated to the principalship (Peterson & Cosner, 2005). However, in spite of the popularity of coaching and mentoring, Rodrigues-Campos et al., (2005) indicated there is a need for more of these types of programs.

Job-embedded learning experiences are closely associated with mentoring and coaching. Each and every workday for the principal presents a multitude of problems to solve, decisions to make, and tasks fraught with ambiguity (Peterson & Cosner, 2005). Structured interactions with experienced administrators and superintendents expanded principals' learning capacity and opportunities to be successful (Knapp, 2003; Peterson & Cosner, 2005).

Collaboration with universities and participation in university coursework are important to principals throughout their careers. While some are critical of university pre-service programs (Grissom & Harrington, 2010), working with universities benefits principals by "providing intellectual resources for professional learning" (Knapp, 2003, p. 133). In a study conducted by Salazar (2007), approximately 80% of the principals surveyed indicated participation in continued coursework offered from universities as a preferred delivery method for professional development. Universities provide an important link to research, the synthetization of research, and the passage of knowledge to those participating in these programs (Grogan & Andrews,

2002). According to LaPointe and Davis (2006), cohorts and collaborative groups are popular methods used in university settings and are excellent methods for use as professional development. Portfolios are also used in university settings and have the potential to assist principals in professional learning (Johnston & Thomas, 2005). Two other forms of collaborative learning are professional learning communities and principal networks. Both types provide principals with the opportunity to participate in professional learning activities as learners, rather than their usual role as facilitators (Hirsh & Hord, 2008; Grissom & Harrington, 2010).

Conferences and workshops have fallen from favor as many professional program coordinators believe these types of programs are generally ineffective (Grissom & Harrington, 2010). Programs which focus on the individual needs of principals seem to be more beneficial and popular with principals (Barth, 1986; Silver et al., 2009). However, in the study conducted by Salazar (2007), workshops and conferences continue to rank as the most preferred method of delivery for professional development. However, in a later study that used Salazar's needs assessment questionnaire, Spanneut et al., (2012) indicates the participants in the study rank attending workshops and conferences less favorably. Where Salazar's study used rural principals as participants, Spanneut et al., used principals from areas other than those considered to be rural. The study also indicates the top four preferences of the participants by grade configuration rather than in general terms. In the PreK-grade six, the principals rated workshops as the second preferred delivery method and conferences as the fourth rated method. In grade configurations containing sixth through eighth grades and ninth through twelfth grades, principals ranked workshops as the most preferred method of delivery, while conferences were the fourth preferred. It would appear through these results, workshops are highly ranked in

preference, while conferences are one of the least preferred methods of delivery for professional development.

Topics for Professional Development

There is a variety of different topics often used for professional development of principals. Two areas receiving attention in the literature are programs designed to assist principals in enhancing teachers' content knowledge and programs that facilitate knowledge of the essential elements of good leadership (Scott & Weber, 2008; Spanneut, et al., 2012).

Raising achievement levels and the ability to analyze sources of data are important topics to school principals and enable principals to monitor the accountability process on their individual campuses (Keith, 2011; Salazar, 2007, Spanneut et al., 2012). Other topics of interest include instructional leadership, management skills, assessment and evaluation, and crisis management (Scott & Weber, 2008). Communication, facilitating change, and sustaining and motivating for continuous improvement are important in certain contexts for principals (Salazar, 2007).

Methods

Participants

Participants in the study included the principals from a rural school district in Louisiana. The district contains 10 schools and all of the principals in the district participated in the study. The participants ranged in age from 36 to 56 and had varying degrees and years of experience.

Instrumentation

There were two instruments included in the study. The first instrument consisted of a survey to determine demographic data and information pertaining to the participants'

professional development activities. The second level of sampling included a group of volunteers who indicated a desire to be included in a focus group interview.

Survey Instrument

The researcher created a survey for the participants to complete during the first visit. The information gathered in the survey provided demographic information as well as information regarding the participants' professional development activities. Specific identification information was not included in the survey.

The researcher developed questions included in the second part of the survey to facilitate the collection of data regarding the principals' professional development activities. Specifically, the survey questions collected the following information: the number of professional development opportunities available to the principals, the number of opportunities in which the principals participated, the effectiveness of the activities as perceived by the principals, whether or not there were follow-up to the activities, whether the professional development activities were mandatory or voluntary, and the source providing the professional development programs (state, local district, or professional organizations). The remaining questions were open-ended and sought additional information regarding the professional development programs.

The researcher administered the survey instrument using paper-and-pencil format to the participants. The participants were given 20 minutes to complete the survey. SPSS was used to provide the descriptive statistics used in the study.

Focus Group Interview

There were at least six respondents selected for participation in the focus group from those principals volunteering. Purposive sampling was used during this process. The

participants were all principals in the same district. It was desirable for the participants to be of both genders, a mixed racial combination, and from a variety of different school settings.

An interview protocol guided the questions asked during this part of the study. Questions selected for use during the focus group included the participants' thoughts regarding professional development including the need for professional development, whether the participants believed they had time to participate in the programs, and the educational background that prepared the participants for administration. Questions regarding the frequency professional development opportunities were made available to the principals and the types of programs provided were included in the protocol.

Questions pertaining to the needs of the participants regarding professional development and the desirability of the participants to participate in professional development were also included. Information regarding the beliefs of the principals regarding what should be included in a program of professional development was sought. What was important to the participants in the way of professional development? Questions regarding follow-up to the professional development activities were also asked. Ninety minutes were allotted as the time for the focus group.

<div align="center">Data Collection and Analysis</div>

The phenomenon in question was what constituted professional development in these districts as opposed to what the composition of professional development was desired by the principals in the district. This was determined in two ways, the survey and focus group interview.

The questions used in the survey were constructed from the information gathered in the research of the literature pertaining to the topics, elements, and types of professional

development being provided to principals. The survey was important in order to establish the characteristics of the participants in the study in the district and to determine if there existed similarities or differences in the responses of the participants in this level of the study based on the descriptive statistics.

An interview protocol was established prior to the individual and focus group interviews. The interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed. The interview and focus group data were analyzed using the constant comparative method. The methods used for data collection included the use of field notes and an audio recording for the interview. In order to facilitate clarity, field notes were taken during the focus group interview which provided a description and understanding of the research setting and the participants' comments. The field notes collected by the researcher contained reflective information, personal reactions to the observations, experiences, and thoughts during the interview sessions (Gay et al., 2012).

The data collected through the focus group interview provided verification of the information contained in the survey. The group interview also provided an in-depth look at information pertaining to the principals' participation in professional development activities. A journal was kept of the researcher's thoughts and actions during the study.

The transcription of the information that was recorded in the focus group interview and the constant comparative method was used to collect data and determine the emerging themes which enabled comparison with the research provided through the literature review. The focus group interview also provided the data that enabled the researcher to determine areas in need of follow-up discussion and to provide greater depth, and thus, richer data to the study. The data from the interview were then compared to the data from the survey in order to view an overall depiction of the results.

Results

Elements of professional development program

There was a wide dispersion of responses to the question on the survey regarding the elements the participants believed were most important to a program of professional development. The question asked the respondents to choose the top three elements of most importance in a program of professional development for principals. The element participants believed to be the most important was that the program be ongoing. While the principals in the interview concurred with the findings in the survey, time was considered to be a prohibitive factor. Ease of implementation followed the need for the program to be ongoing.

The principals also believed the program needed to have follow-up. Two principals believed the newer principals especially needed an ongoing program or professional development, one that trained the new principals in "the things they need to know" and the other stated, "Without follow-up, the information just falls by the wayside"

The principals believed the local districts needed to be the entity that provided the professional development for the principals since "the district understood the climate and culture in the district." This was also verified through the survey. On the survey, the participants overwhelmingly indicated the program needed to be district initiated and led. The program, according to the participants, desired for the program to be collaborative and useful which would enable the principals to discuss pertinent issues the schools faced.

Contexts of professional development program.

The survey asked the principals to check all of the various types of professional development activities in which they had participated over the course of the past year. Nine of the participants indicated they had participated in conferences and workshops, five in

professional learning communities, and three in coaching mentoring activities and job embedded professional development activities. Two were involved in cohorts and one in a program of professional development utilizing portfolios.

The participants indicated in the survey that five of the principals participated in professional development utilizing professional learning communities. When pressed to describe the workshop, only one of the participants in the focus group indicated she had attended a workshop where professional learning communities was the topic of the conference.

The next question in the survey was somewhat related in that it asked the participants how many different types of professional development programs the principals attended over the course of the past year. Four of the 10 indicated they had only attended possibly one professional development activity. Three indicated they had attended two to three, one three to four, and two indicated they had attended more than four.

The principals surveyed believed face-to-face professional development activities were better than using platforms such as Blackboard or Moodle. Three different participants in the focus group commented negatively when it came to professional development activities that were not face-to-face in nature. Face-to-face lends itself more to a participatory and collaborative context than web-based systems, particularly if web-based is asynchronous. So, there was consistency in context and elements across data sources in this area.

Internship programs were discussed by the principals and the general consensus was these types of programs were like being in school again. The principals also stated the leader of professional development programs should have experience as a principal or be led and directed by principals.

The top three contexts principals preferred according to the survey included participative workshops, the conference format, and professional learning communities. Participative workshops were important to the principals and the participants desired being able to bounce ideas off of each other and discuss issues in an informal setting where the participants could, "sit, eat, and drink."

Professional development utilizing the conference format was the second most preferred type of professional development. While the survey indicated the participants liked the traditional conference format, during the focus group interview principals indicated a desire for the freedom to move around and not sit there while somebody lectured to the group. Very seldom does a program of this type provide follow-up which was something the principals indicated they felt was important in any program of professional development. Nevertheless, the rural principals still desired this type format. The principals also selected professional learning communities as a preferred context for the professional development programs even though there was an apparent lack of knowledge regarding professional learning communities.

Topics for professional development.

The professional development the principals attended included a variety of different topics. The use of data to improve student performance was the topic the principals most indicated they had attended, followed closely with enhancing teaching, development of leadership capacity, and facilitating change. The other top areas the principals indicated may have been a result of the implementation of the new teacher evaluation system.

Maximizing instructional time, crisis management, improving communication, and personnel matters were the topics of the professional development activities the principals had

attended. With the exception of crisis management, these areas were also a part of the new teacher evaluation program training sponsored by the state.

Another topic of interest mentioned in the focus group interview was the topic of dealing with personnel matters. The participant who often struggled with whether or not to document a teacher believed this was an area neglected in professional development. Dealing with the stress involved in the job as principal was a topic the principals believed needed to be addressed through professional development.

Other areas the participants in the survey indicated as topics that should be included in professional development were teacher evaluation, data interpretation, and leadership skills. These were all areas the participants indicated they had participated in over the course of the last year.

Of the 10 survey participants in the rural district, the majority believed professional development should be a combination of mandatory and voluntary. It became evident through talking with the focus group principals that they were currently participating in both types of professional development. The state was usually the provider of professional development.

<center>Analysis and Discussion of Research Findings</center>

The rural district did not provide the principals in the district an organized program of professional development sponsored primarily by the district. However, this statement does not mean to imply the principals in the rural district did not receive professional development. It simply was not an organized program provided through the district. The principals obtained their own professional development through conferences provided by professional organizations or state sponsored trainings provided when some new state-wide program was being

implemented. The district did provide a modicum amount of professional development as needed, just not through an ongoing and organized program.

Even though the district did not provide an organized program of professional development, there were certain elements identified through the survey and interview that were applicable. Participants in the rural district desired their programs to have collaboration, follow-up, reflection, and flexibility. Collaboration between principals allows the participants to work together and use a participant's strengths and experiences to bolster the experience and performance of others (Reed, 2010). It is important for professional development to provide follow-up to the acquisition of new skills and the application of those new skills in the work environment (Rodriguez-Campos et al., 2005). Closely related to follow-up in professional development programs was reflection. The opportunity to reflect on actions taken in given situations based on feedback was important to the professional growth of an individual (Evans & Mohr, 1999). Flexibility of the professional development programs offered was the last quality that was important to the principals. According to Evans and Mohr (1999), the professional development program provided should be flexible in the implementation process.

There were several other areas missing from the data provided by the principals. These areas included: (1) a research-based program, (2) the integration of theory and practice, (3) a clear mission and goals, (4) alignment with reform initiatives, (5) rigorous planning, (6) easily implemented, (7) adequate resources, and (8) sufficient time to cover the material.

When asked about the elements of professional development the district principals desired in a program of professional development, the top response was that the program be ongoing. Principals need a program of ongoing professional development opportunities to

update their capacity of knowledge and skills on a continual basis (LaPointe & Davis, 2006; Salazar, 2007).

The second part of the question asked about the contexts of the professional development programs in which the principals had participated. Participants identified workshops/conferences, professional learning communities and, coaching and mentoring as their preferred contexts for professional development. Workshops and conferences are a popular method of professional development (Grissom & Harrington, 2010). Professional learning communities provide principals with the opportunity to become learners rather than their usual role as facilitators (Hirsh & Hord, 2008). Alsbury and Hackmann (2006) indicated professional development using coaching and mentoring activities met the expectations of the participants and that the most important component in the programs was the development of the mentor-protégé relationship.

The last part of the question was to identify the topics of the professional development in which the principals had participated. The use of data, enhancing teaching, facilitating change, and the development of leadership skills were listed as important topics by the participants. The same topics were identified by the participants as also being the topics most preferred for their professional development. The use of data, enhancing teaching, facilitating change, and the development of leadership skills were all topics that could be part of a program to allow principals to become the instructional leaders on their campuses. For example, Guskey (2003) indicates that the enhancement of teachers' content and pedagogic capacity was the content listed as the most preferred area of study. Scott and Weber (2008) discussed the fact that as instructional leaders, principals needed to have knowledge of assessment and evaluation. This was also confirmed by Keith (2011) and Spanneut et al. (2012). Salazar (2007) and Spanneut et

al. (2012) found facilitating change and sustaining and motivating for continuous improvement was important in certain contexts for principals. Lastly, the development of leadership capacity among the participants is vital in a program of professional development (Guskey, 2003; Keith, 2011; Scott & Weber, 2008).

Conclusions

Principals desire professional development and are specific regarding what a program of professional development designed for principals should include. For years principals have participated in dry, boring workshops where they sat passively as information was delivered through the use of a lecture format. This type of professional development was aptly described by one participant in one of the focus group as having a "cookie cutter" approach to professional development without follow-up. The "one and done" approach to professional development often fell far short of usefulness and the ability to be applied in the principals' setting of their home school. There is a better way.

The desires of the principals included in the study were remarkably similar. This was evident through the comments made by the principals during the interview and the results of the survey. The rural district had used the "cookie cutter" approach for professional development and did not have a mission statement or vision guiding their professional development. There was very little collaboration or follow-up to professional learning in the rural community. Lastly, the rural principals were responsible for their own professional development.

Perhaps a "road map" to meaningful professional development could result from the findings of this study. Principals in this rural district wanted an ongoing program that was collaborative and participative in nature. The principals also desired for professional learning communities to be the context used in the programs. Topics should include the use of data,

enhancing instruction, facilitating change, and the development of leadership skills. The expectations the principals had for professional development that should be considered for professional development included were the use of data, personnel matters, and implementation strategies for changes to the school campus. There is too much at stake not to consider these desires.

Implications

When viewing the results contained in this study, if other principals feel the same regarding professional development as do the participants of this study, perhaps a new way of viewing programs of professional development and the content of those programs may be established. However, additional studies are needed to determine if the opinions of this group of principals are consistent with principals in other rural districts.

There are several groups who may be impacted by the implications of this study. District superintendents and principals are the most obvious and it is hoped this and other research will provide a place for district personnel to start when designing a program for the principals in their districts. Other groups of individuals who may benefit from this study may also include those employed in state departments of education and are responsible for providing professional development to school administrators or establishing guidelines for these types of programs. Lastly, the researchers and others in the field of educational leadership may use the research and the data contained in this study to add to existing research. Programs grounded in research will increase principals' capacity for leadership and increase the success rate for principals.

Recommendations for Future Study

This study was limited in its scope in that only one district was included in the study. The sample of principals used in the study provided the data needed for this study. There

are a number of districts that may be considered as rural. This study does not take into

consideration the types of programs other rural districts or suburban and urban districts would

prefer. District in other regions of the country could have a different set of opinions and

experiences as well. Every district has a different educational environment, resources,

demographics, etc. which could impact the responses of the principals. Principals in other locals

may have different views and as such, it should not be assumed this particular group of

principals is representative of all the principals in the profession of education.

There may be other elements, contexts, and topics not included in this study that should

be given consideration. The lists included in the survey is not meant to be all inclusive. Other

methodologies could be used for a study of this topic. The methodologies used where a result of

the type study that fit the research questions being asked.

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