Collaborative Principal Preparation Programs: A Systematic Review and Synthesis of Qualitative Research

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.

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The purpose of this systematic review was to (1) conduct the systematic search of the literature to identify the studies on partnerships in school leader preparation; and to (2) systematically review the findings of these studies and synthesize them into major themes reflecting the state of the art in collaborative leadership preparation in the United States. Descriptive themes focused on the reasons for universities and school districts to collaborate; the content of collaborative leader preparation programs; the practitioners' involvement; factors to success; implementation barriers and successes; and the lessons learned. Reflections on the collaborative approach to principal preparation are provided.

Introduction

In spite of inconclusive and often contradictory findings regarding educational administration and the factors impacting it, the general agreement among researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners is the importance of leadership to teacher and school effectiveness and student educational achievement. Notably, in the educational accountability era, "school improvement rests to an unprecedented degree on the quality of school leadership" (Hess & Kelly, 2005, p. 245). The efforts to measure and assess leadership quality have resulted in an increased attention to principal preparation, support, evaluation, development, and retention (e.g., Hess, 2003; Levine, 2005; Wallace Foundation, 2005, 2009). On the national level, the U.S. Department of Education (2010) encouraged school districts to improve teacher and leader effectiveness by awarding grants to support innovations at the state and district level.

Notwithstanding the efforts to support, develop, and retain sitting principals, an area that has received greater attention is leadership preparation. This interest was partly attributed to connecting school effectiveness to leadership preparation: if "there is a national imperative to improve our failing schools, then there is also a national imperative to strengthen the preparation of school leaders" (Wallace Foundation, 2008, p. 11). To the growing concern over leadership preparation, quality, and effectiveness, researchers have responded with numerous studies of leader preparation programs, while practitioners and professional organizations have developed alternative forms of school leader preparation.

Believed to be the key to principal effectiveness in the leadership position, leader preparation has been thoroughly examined by researchers and policy-makers over the last two decades. Aptly summarized by Orr (2011), "Leadership preparation has become one of this decade's primary approaches to educational reform and improvement of student achievement" (p. 115). Because in the USA, much like in other educational systems around the globe, leadership preparation has been traditionally conducted by the universities, and graduate leadership preparation programs have been among the first to face scrutiny and criticisms. As a result, numerous studies criticized university-based leader preparation as inadequate and ineffective (e.g., Elmore, 2000; Farkass, Johnson, & Duffett, 2003; Hess, 2003; Levine, 2005) and suggested the need to restructure leadership preparation programs (Hess & Kelly, 2005; Young & Kochan, 2004). Specifically, traditional leader preparation programs did not prepare principals to effectively use data, do research, and hire and evaluate personnel (Hess & Kelly, 2005). To summarize, "All too often, training has failed to keep pace with the evolving role of principals. This is especially true at most of the 500-plus university-based programs where the majority of school leaders are trained" (Wallace Foundation, 2012, p. 6).

In light of such criticisms, some university-based leadership preparation programs went for an accreditation review by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the Educational Leadership Coordinating Council (ELCC) in an effort to improve program quality (Orr, 2011). In addition, the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) suggested ISLLC standards with an overall goal of increasing the quality and accountability of leader preparation (McCarthy, 2008). Although these standards were criticized by some researchers (e.g., English & Papa, 2010), they offered much-needed guidelines to regulate leader preparation. The importance of standards was emphasized by recent reports asserting that exemplary principal preparation programs are aligned with professional and state standards for leadership preparation (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010). Thus, university-based leadership preparation has been changing to reflect the needs of the accountability era by preparing instructional leaders, ready to be effective from the first day in the seat. Among the new components of school leader preparation were: (1) increased entrance requirements; (2) cohort models; (3) performance-based standards; (4) individualization; (5) skills development and assessment; (6) reflective practice; and (7) continuous program review (Lauder, 2000). A recent review of published state regulations for principal preparation (Roach, Smith, & Boutin, 2011) outlined major trends in the principalship: (1) standards-based preparation; (2) increasing assessment and accountability; (3) growing number of providers for administrator preparation and development, and (4) assessing principal success based on school improvement and

student scores on standardized exams. In addition, current principal preparation programs include field-based learning (Reames, 2010), action research (Turk, 2001), and case studies (Sherman, 2008) as part of their curricula. One of the new areas in leader preparation is blended or online principal preparation programs (e.g., Korach & Agans, 2011). On the one hand, offering online instruction is the new direction in education, from massive open online courses (MOOCs), to online webinars and professional development seminars, to blended or courses and programs delivered entirely in the online format that are increasingly offered by the U.S. universities. Also, some international universities are adopting this model. On the other hand, online delivery may limit or fully eliminate face-to-face interaction that is important to promote connectedness among the students of principal preparation programs (Choi, Browne-Ferrigno, & Muth, 2005).

In addition to restructuring traditional university-based leadership preparation, states, school districts, and professional organizations have suggested alternative forms of leadership preparation. Among the most known are the initiatives of the Danforth Foundation (Murphy, Moorman, & McCarthy, 2008); the Wallace Foundation (Wallace Foundation, 2009, 2012); and alternative principal certifications offered by professional and for-profit organizations (Murphy et al., 2008). In spite of the short existence of such programs, there is a growing interest in them, heated by the research reports indicating that these alternative preparation programs are more rigorous and more effective than traditional programs (Militello, Cajda, & Bowers, 2009), graduating better-prepared candidates for school-level leadership positions (Bradshaw, Perreault, McDowelle, & Bell, 1997).

A separate place in principal preparation literature is given to collaborative programs. Collaboration can occur at the state level (Williams, Burns, Johnson, & Lindle (1996) or at a district level (Wallace Foundation, 2008). One aspect of this approach to preparing school principals is partnering school districts with the universities to equip aspiring school leaders with practical and theoretical knowledge necessary to succeed as a principal (Hale & Moorman, 2003; Mohn & Machell, 2005). Overall collaborative preparation programs are believed to be "of better quality and [...] more effective, particularly in their instructional leadership ability, capacity to transition well into leadership roles, and understanding of district functions and processes" (Orr, King, & LaPointe, 2010, p. 120).

Study Purpose

Notwithstanding the growing interest in the topic, research reports that principal preparation has not been systematically examined and calls for more research in this area (Hallinger, 2003; Cowie & Crawford, 2007). One of the promising trends in leadership preparation is university-school district partnerships that are often suggested as a more effective way to prepare principals (e.g., Orr, 2006). Notably, a recently published review of international patterns in principal preparation emphasizes collaboration among government, university, and schools as a common feature of high-quality leader preparation programs (Walker, Bryant, & Lee, 2013). However, because this form of delivery is relatively new, it should be further examined to outline potential areas in need of improvement. Therefore, the purpose of this systematic review is to (1) conduct the

systematic search of the literature to identify the studies on partnerships in school leader preparation; and to (2) systematically review the findings of these studies and synthesize them into major themes reflecting the state of the art in collaborative leadership preparation in the United States.

The information about the state of collaborative leadership preparation in the U.S. is readily available from numerous sources such as research articles, reports, and executive summaries. The present article does not provide an original study; instead, it offers a synthesis of research on what is known on the topic. In so doing, it offers a summary of the major themes from original studies, thus contributing to the literature on educational preparation and to the larger field of educational administration.

Methodology

This study was conducted in three steps: (1) systematic literature search; (2) critical assessment of the identified articles; and (3) thematic synthesis of the articles. First, to identify published research on the topic of interest, a systematic search of the major educational research databases was conducted. Specifically, five online databases were searched JSTOR, EBSCO, SAGE Journals Online, ScienceDirect and Web of Science. Search terms included: 'leader preparation,' 'principal preparation,' 'district partnership,' and 'university district partnership,' and 'collaborative leader preparation.' The initial search returned over 3000 entries; however, when the search was modified to include either 'partnership' or 'collaboration,' the number of entries reduced to fewer than 300. The titles and abstracts of these entries were screened to examine their fit to this analysis. Criteria for inclusion in this systematic review were: (1) qualitative (or predominantly qualitative) research design; (2) English language of the manuscript; (3) focus on the U.S, context; and (4) the publication date between 2007 and 2013. This timespan was selected to include the most recent published studies to reflect the state of the art of collaborative leaders preparation in the USA. In total, there were 26 studies selected at this stage and used in the next step.

Second, a critical appraisal of the identified articles (n=26) was conducted. To assess the studies, an instrument developed by the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (2006) was used. The instrument contained 10 questions aiming to assess the rigor, credibility, validity, study design, relevance to this analysis, and the overall merit of the manuscript. If the article assessment was over 25 points (out of 36 possible points), the article was included in the subsequent thematic synthesis. This step was added to include only high-quality relevant studies, not all studies found on the topic. Therefore, the sample was purposive, not all-inclusive (Doyle, 2003), aligned with qualitative methodology. In addition, when the articles were identified, their references were screened for additional relevant articles; if the title seemed related to the topic of interest, the manuscripts were sought after and included in the analysis. In total, there were 10 manuscripts selected for this analysis: 8 of them were research studies and 2 were research reports (Fry, Bottoms, O'Neill, & Walker, 2007; Orr, King, LaPointe, 2010). I chose to include these research reports in this analysis because they (1) focused on the topic of interest and (2) summarized the data on collaborative leader preparation from several states, thus offering a broader perspective on the topic.

Third, thematic synthesis of the selected articles was conducted. I used inductive approach to thematic coding, starting with the data from the original studies, then developing descriptive themes that were close to the original studies, and then abstracting the major themes into the analytical themes. The process followed the steps suggested for the thematic synthesis of qualitative research (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Overall, the theory behind thematic synthesis is examining the primary studies to identify and develop major descriptive and analytic themes (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The body of the analyzed articles was loaded into the ATLAS.ti where the text was coded. For the research articles, the sections titled 'context' and 'findings' or 'results' was coded and used in this analysis. For the research reports, I coded the majority of the text, specifically focusing on the sections devoted to presenting the descriptive and perception data about the topic. Upon the initial coding, the codes were grouped into categories. Then, descriptive themes were developed (presented in the findings section). Finally, descriptive themes were grouped into analytical themes (detailed in discussion).

Findings

The studies used in this analysis varied greatly in scope and focus (see Table 1). First, the programs ranged from recently introduced to those with over 10 years of existence. Second, the data used by the original studies were collected from different stakeholders (e.g., university-level providers; district-level leaders; program students), thus focusing on different aspects of the topic.

Table 1
Studies at a Glance

#	Authors, Year	Leader Preparation Program(s)	State(s)	Data From
1	Goduto, Doolittle, and Leake (2008)	17 preparation programs offered by the state's universities; statewide efforts to improve leader preparation	New Jersey	University-level providers
2	Kochan (2010)	12 preparation programs offered by the state's universities; statewide efforts to improve leader preparation	Alabama	College deans
3	Reames (2010)	Instructional Leadership Program of Auburn University	Alabama	Stakeholders, students
4	Reed and Llanes (2010)	Principal preparation program of Auburn University, redesigned as partnership with 7 school districts	Alabama	University-level providers
5	Korach and Agans (2011)	Blended online program, modified from the innovative classroom-based principal preparation program	Not specified	University-level providers

#	Author(s), Year	Report Focus	State(s)	Data from
6	Sanzo, Myran, and Clayton (2011)	The Futures program [pseudonym], a fine-year project funded by US DoE grant, aimed at developing a the university-school district partnership	No specified	University and district stakeholders, students
7	Davis and Darling-Hammond (2012)	5 innovative principal preparation programs – described as exemplary university-based programs (unlike previously examined programs, these programs have existed for over 10 years, thus showing clear outcomes)	Mississippi, Connecticut, New York, California, Illinois	Students, program directors, program description
8	Orr (2012)	6 leadership preparation programs based on the district-university collaboration	Massachusetts, Kentucky, Rhode Island, Missouri, Illinois	District and university officials; programs' features

Third, some studies focused on one specific collaborative program (thus, providing more details about a specific partnership initiative), while others offered a comparative overview of several university-school district partnerships (the broader scope limited the ability to offer many context-specific details pertaining to specific partnerships examined). However, these differences were considered an advantage in this analysis, allowing to compare and combine the perspectives of multiple stakeholders involved in university-school district partnerships and to include more collaborative leader preparation programs in this synthesis.

The two larger research reports (see Table 2) also covered numerous leader preparation programs. However, not being constrained to the word limit of a research article, they offered greater details into leader preparation programs they examined. An additional benefit of including these two reports was their attention to the state regulations and policy implications pertaining to improving school leader preparation in different contexts. Finally, they assessed the quality of the programs examined, thus adding an additional lens of comparison.

Table 2
Research Reports at a Glance

#	Author(s), Year	Report Focus	State(s)	Data from
1	Fry, Bottoms, O'Neill, and Walker (2007)	Examination of learning-centered school leadership systems, advocated by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) – brief overview of progress in 16 southern states	Alabama, Louisiana, Maryland (as exemplary states)	States' leader preparation programs (content, description, assessment)

2	Orr, King, and LaPointe (2010)	Case studies of eight urban districts' approaches to developing school leaders, followed by the cross-case analysis and comparison. Note: one of the districts was not affiliated with a university.	Massachusetts, Kentucky, Rhode Island, Missouri, Illinois Indiana	Program description and features; perceptions of district and university officials; students

Major Themes

Thematic synthesis of these articles and reports yielded seven major themes pertaining to the development and implementation of collaborative leader preparation. They are provided in the remainder of the findings section, along with supporting references.

University-School District Collaborations: Driven by Local Initiatives, Guided by State Mandates

Collaborative efforts of universities and school districts to redesign leader preparation stemmed in response to criticisms about inadequate university programs to prepare effective leaders for modern schools (Sanzo, Myran, & Clayton, 2011) and the expressed necessity to redesign principal preparation to better meet the needs of schools (Fry, Bottoms, O'Neill, & Walker, 2007). One of the key critiques of traditional leader preparation was the disconnect between the theory taught in the preparation programs and practical realities of school districts (Sanzo, Myran, & Clayton, 2011). Thus, collaborative leader preparation programs offered a way to bridge theory and practice (Goduto, Doolittle, & Leake, 2008; Sanzo, Myran, & Clayton, 2011) by preparing students to deal with authentic problems faced by school leaders (Reed & Llanes, 2010). Universities adopted a more inclusive approach to leader preparation by including practitioners to avoid reinventing the same programs that university programs previously exhibited (Goduto, Doolittle, & Leake, 2008). For school districts, this approach was a way to impact university program changes to meet the district's needs (Orr, King, & LaPointe (2010). For universities, it offered an opportunity to expand the program beyond the minimum licensure requirements (Orr, King, & LaPointe, 2010). Notably, in many cases, these collaborations were driven or even mandated by the state policies (e.g., Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Goduto, Doolittle, & Leake, 2008; Kochan, 2010; Reames, 2010; Reed & Llanes, 2010). Furthermore, the states' regulatory policies and regulations about program accreditation, licensure requirements, and professional standards greatly impacted and guided program development and implementation (Fry, Bottoms, O'Neill, & Walker, 2007; Orr, King, & LaPointe, 2010). In summary, although universities and school districts were instrumental in developing and sustaining collaborative partnerships, these efforts were guided and, in some cases, initiated by the state policies and standards set by professional organizations.

Content and Implementation: Standards-based, Experiential Activities Aimed at Bridging Theory and Practice

First and foremost, restructured programs have higher admission standards, rigorous recruitment and selection, and candidates' assessment (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Orr, King, & LaPointe, 2010). Because of the critiques of the traditional courses, the content of collaborative leader preparation was redesigned (Orr, King, & LaPointe, 2010) to include the focus on data-based decision making (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012). Specifically, curriculum was redesigned based on the standards, literature review and the partner school district needs (Orr, 2012; Reames, 2010). In addition, program content included standards-based activities, guided mostly by the ISLLC standards (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Fry, Bottoms, O'Neill, & Walker 2007; Goduto, Doolittle, & Leake, 2008; Orr, King, & LaPointe, 2010). Also, course integration aimed at connecting theory and practice (Sanzo, Myran, & Clayton, 2011) promoted integrating district-defined competencies in leader preparation courses (Korach & Agans, 2011; Orr, King, & LaPointe, 2010). In addition, contextually relevant activities were encouraged as an effective addition to traditional approaches (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Sanzo, Myran, & Clayton, 2011).

Experiential learning was regarded as especially important (Orr, King, & LaPointe, 2010). The most valued and effective experiential learning was a lengthy internship (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012: Fry, Bottoms, O'Neill, & Walker, 2007), with some districts providing a full-time, paid, one-year internships to their aspiring leaders (Orr, King, & LaPointe, 2010). Other types of experiential learning included learning communities (Goduto, Doolittle, & Leake, 2008); supervision and mentoring (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Fry, Bottoms, O'Neill, & Walker, 2007; Orr, King, & LaPointe, 2010; Reames, 2010; Sanzo, Myran, & Clayton, 2011); and field-based coaches (Reames, 2010). Instructional methods combined traditional forms of delivery with team teaching (Reames, 2010), online discussions (Korach & Agans, 2011), and novel instructional methods such as think tank activity (Reames, 2010). The overall focus of the program was developing a professional learning community (Reed & Llanes, 2010) to promote lifelong learning.

Practitioner Involvement: Important at All Stages of Collaborative Partnership

The programs presented in the studies used for this analysis differed in the level of practitioner involvement. Typically, university leaders involved practitioners in:

a. Developing program admission criteria (Fry, Bottoms, O'Neill, & Walker 2007; Orr, King, & LaPointe, 2010; Reames, 2010);
b. Curriculum development (Goduto, Doolittle, & Leake, 2008; Orr, King, & LaPointe, 2010);
c. Selecting candidates (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Fry, Bottoms, O'Neill, & Walker, 2007);
d. Teaching some classes on partner school campuses (Reames, 2010);
e. Serving on the committees and advisory councils (Fry, Bottoms, O'Neill, & Walker, 2007; Reed & Llanes, 2010); and

f. Providing mentoring and internship opportunities (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Sanzo, Myran, & Clayton, 2011)

The level of district involvement generally depended on the interest of the district leadership in the collaborative work and on the initial agreements between the university and the district.

Successful Collaborative Partnerships: Prioritizing Trust, Relationship-building, and Program Ownership

As with any collaborative effort, university-school district partnerships should be based on trust and clear and frequent communication of the partnering sides (Goduto, Doolittle, & Leake, 2008; Reames, 2010). Notably, good long-standing previous relationships of university staff with school personnel were critical for the partnership (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Kochan, 2010; Reames, 2010; Reed & Llanes, 2010), Sanzo, Myran, & Clayton, 2011). Furthermore, different types of relationships (Orr, 2012) should be sustained; specifically, inter-organizational (between districts and universities); intra-organizational (between the program and other district units); and intra-organizational (between the program and other university units). Developing a sense of shared ownership was considered an effective approach to increase partnership sustainability (Goduto, Doolittle, & Leake, 2008; Reed & Llanes, 2010). Finally, the involvement and support of university and school-level leadership and support from the state department of education were crucial to the success of such collaborative work (Kochan, 2010).

Barriers to Implementation: Time Management, Lack of Support, and Fiscal Challenges

Challenges to effective development and implementation of university-school district partnership came from the university, school district, and external sources. University and school-level leaders were concerned about increased workload and time management (Reed & Llanes, 2010; Sanzo, Myran, & Clayton, 2011); staff and leadership turnover and related staffing issues (Orr, King, & LaPointe, 2010; Orr, 2012; Reed & Llanes, 2010); the lack of administrative support, and the lack of clarity about what to expect (Kochan, 2010). In addition, partnerships were vulnerable to the university and school district politics (Korach & Agans, 2011). Although leaders' initial apprehension and resistance to change were alleviated (Kochan, 2010; Sanzo, Myran, & Clayton, 2011), later stages of program functioning included partnership-related issues such as adding new partners (Reed & Llanes, 2010) and financial challenges (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Orr, King, & LaPointe, 2010).

Collaborative Programs' Successes: Perceived as More Effective in Preparing Effective Leaders

Although in most cases it was too early to assess the real impact of this redesigned form of leader preparation on the graduates and the schools they lead, early evidence is generally positive and promising. Compared to traditional leader preparation, these

programs are believed to offer better or improved leader preparation (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Orr, King, & LaPointe, 2010). Additionally, these programs consistently receive more positive student feedback and higher ratings (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Sanzo, Myran, & Clayton, 2011). Most importantly, the graduates of exemplary partnership programs have higher administrative employment rates upon graduation, higher rates of passing the state licensure assessment, and improve the schools they lead (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012). Furthermore, research points out direct and indirect educational and organizational benefits: more highly qualified applications; district learning; and benefits for the universities (Orr, King, & LaPointe, 2010). Yet, these successes should be considered with caution, not assuming that they automatically apply to all collaborative partnerships, especially given their context-specific nature that does not allow to combine them all in one category.

The Lessons Learned: Importance of Partnering; Building Relationships; and Connecting Program Content to the Districts' Realities

Overall, the main learning from implementing such partnership is the importance of both sides to the success of the collaborative initiative. The success of these programs emphasizes the critical role of practitioners in redesigning leader preparation (Goduto, Doolittle, & Leake, 2008; Reames, 2010; Reed & Llanes, 2010). Universities and districts should draw on their areas of expertise to benefit the partnership initiative (Orr, King, & LaPointe, 2010). Furthermore, building strong relationships is key to the initiative's success (Orr, King, & LaPointe, 2010; Reames, 2010; Reed & Llanes, 2010). Given the importance of funding to sustain the program, there is a need to look for other funding sources to fund integral components of the programs (Orr, King, & LaPointe, 2010). Also, the general consensus was that effective programs focus on collaboration, are problem or project-based; and concentrate on real-life problems (Korach & Agans, 2011; Sanzo, Myran, & Clayton, 2011). Finally, it is important to involve external reviewers (Goduto, Doolittle, & Leake, 2008; Kochan, 2010; Reames, 2010; Reed & Llanes, 2010) and to evaluate these programs to identify the areas in need of improvement (Korach & Agans, 2011; Orr, King, & LaPointe, 2010)

Discussion and Conclusion

Descriptive themes reflected predominantly optimistic view of collaborative leader preparation. Although the barriers and challenges were acknowledged, the promise of better-prepared leaders who will improve schools and increase student achievement outweigh the concerns. In the remainder of this paper, I will present five major analytical themes pertaining mainly to the sustainability of the initial success of such collaborative leader preparation programs that were developed based on the description of the sample of such programs (and most of them were considered effective) in the analyzed articles and reports. The majority of published work on university-school district collaborative initiatives to leader preparation is positive about these redesigned programs, hopeful about their promised successes. I aim to contribute to this dialogue by pointing some troubling aspects of such collaborative approach.

Vulnerabilities of Collaborative Programs: Strong Dependence on State Policies and Leadership Support

Research indicates that the majority of these programs were initiated in response to the state policies demanding the inclusion of districts in leader preparation. This aspect is important to keep in mind because if the state policy changes, it may be detrimental to these programs that depend on state support. Furthermore, the success of the collaborative approach is grounded in the support of the university-level and district-level leaders. Thus, if one side loses an interest, or if leader turnover is high (which is the case for most school districts around the country), the impact on the leader preparation program will be noticeable, and, most likely, detrimental.

Sustainability Concerns in the Era of Limited Finding

Another concern mentioned by all studies examined for this analysis is the lack of funding to support all the effective components of collaborative leader preparation programs (e.g., mentoring, coaching, paid full-time internships). The state, US DoE, or professional organization grants initially fund most of these collaborative initiatives. However, the question remains—how to fiscally keep the program when the grant is over? Financial concerns are especially important nowadays, in an era of funding cuts. Some researchers suggest looking for alternative funding sources. However, those may not be readily available to poor local school districts. On the other hand, if trimming the budget would mean that these programs would have to drop their most costly program components (e.g., internships, mentoring), it is questionable if the program will be able to graduate the candidates as well prepared without these essential components.

Keeping up the Good Work after the Novelty Wears Off

The majority of these collaborative leader preparation programs are new. Naturally, this aspect makes it hard to assess the real impact and effectiveness of such programs in preparing good school leaders. Even if the initial reports about the successes of these programs are true, there is still a doubt if the good work will continue after the novelty wears off. Given that it has happened to other initiatives in the past, it is plausible to suggest this as a potential outcome. The changes in leadership, introduction of some other new initiative, shifts in mission, vision, and priorities—all of these may cause the decrease in the interest towards these collaborative programs, leading to eventual decay.

Dangers in Preparing Leaders Tailored to the Needs of the Specific District

One of the lauded strong aspects of collaborative leader preparation is tailoring preparation courses to the needs of the specific district. While it has undoubted benefits, it can also be potentially harmful. For example, if the graduate of a leadership program is prepared to the needs of a specific rural school district, it may limit his or her changes to obtain a position is a remote rural school district. Also, if the school district expresses strong preference for hiring principals who went through leadership preparation tailored to this district needs, it may not consider applicants from outside the district, thus limiting

the flow of new ideas and approaches associated with hiring people with a different educational background.

Moving Online: A New Beginning or an End?

Offering online and blended courses is becoming more common and accepted. However, it is unclear whether this model of collaborative leader preparation may be moved online without losing the features that make it successful. Specifically, two articles used for this analysis offered dramatically opposite viewpoints on this issue: while for Reames (2010) offering all classes face-to-face was a clear benefit that strengthened the program, Korach and Agans (2011) explored the option of moving the program to an online blended format. Furthermore, they even suggested that blended delivery alleviated some concerns related to being vulnerable to the university and school district politics. Overall, incorporating virtual learning seems inevitable, given the current trends in higher education.

Implications and Conclusion

The findings of this synthesis of research suggest several major implications for practice, policy, and future research. From the results of this analysis, practitioners will better understand the lessons learned by universities and school districts while implementing collaborative leader preparation program and may use this knowledge in planning and developing their own partnerships. Given that the strong preexisting relationships between school districts and universities were an important requirement, both university and district leaders should focus on building stronger affiliations before developing an official partnership. The policy-makers may learn from this synthesis about the effective components of university-school district partnerships and use this knowledge to guide the development of future educational policies. Finally, the implications for research are manifold, given that this area of educational leadership is constantly evolving. Future research projects may focus on the role of leadership in developing collaborative leader preparation programs; explore additional funding sources; examine the sustainability of such innovative approaches; and study longitudinally the impact of the graduates of such collaborative leader preparation programs on school effectiveness and student achievement.

To sum up, all of the concerns presented in the discussion section are associated with sustaining the initial promise of collaborative school leader preparation as well as the possibility to move to the online delivery. Researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers should better examine these aspects. Given that collaborative partnerships are still at their infancy stage, multiple future studies will closely examine different aspects of such programs' design and implementation. Along with the studies used for this analysis, this research synthesis is at the beginning of the discussion around the collaborative approach to preparing future school leaders.

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