The Nexus between Theory and Practice: How the Transformative Initiative Pathway Improved Clinical Practice for Educational Leadership Preparation

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

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This qualitative study, situated within a larger interdisciplinary effort by a graduate school of education and human development at a large private university on the east coast, documents the perspectives of administrative interns on the significance of their experiences engaged in clinical practice. Semi-structured interview data from 20 administrative interns were analyzed through the lens of the following Domains of Interest: a) assessment, b) curriculum and clinical connections, c) mentoring and supervision, and d) context and design of clinical experiences, as well as how these experiences and level of inquiry due to the TI pathway oriented participants into the role of administrator. Data analysis suggests three main themes influencing administrative interns engaged in clinical practice: a) the shift in perspective from the role of teacher to the role of administrator (aligning with domains a, b, and d), b) clinical practice experiences provided strong connections to course content in some areas, and weak connections in others (aligning with domains b and d), and c) the level of mentoring and support from internship mentors, although inconsistent, had a significant impact on how they experienced and made meaning of their clinical experiences (aligning with domain c). These findings have implications for university preparation programs, school districts, and shed light on a unique pathway to accreditation, which focuses on situated learning and role transformation as a result of clinical practice experiences.

School Leadership Preparation Improvement: How the NCATE-TI Pathway for Accreditation Improved Clinical Practice

Objectives

One of the most prominent criticisms of administrator preparation programs is that they do not provide meaningful, authentic internship opportunities for candidates (Fry, Bottoms, & O'Neill, 2005; Levine, 2005). Clinical practice opportunities for aspiring educational leaders must provide ample and diverse experiences encountering problems of practice (Barnett, 2004; Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Cunningham & Sherman, 2008; Orr & Orphanos, 2011; Roach, Smith, & Boutin, 2011; Sherman & Crum, 2009). Researchers have analyzed the effectiveness of key components of administrator preparation programs, as identified by program faculty and alumni (Duncan, Range, & Scherz, 2011; Militello, Gajda, & Bowers, 2009; Orr & Orphanos, 2011; Thessin & Clayton, 2013); however, little attention has been paid to studying current candidates about clinical practice as a means to gain experience in a real-world setting, or assessing how program experiences affect their professional growth (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2012; Crow & Whiteman, 2016). This study aims to fill that gap by capturing the voices of current candidates in an administrator preparation program by analyzing how they assess their professional growth, and describe their experiences engaging in clinical practice. Results of this research will not only fulfill accreditation requirements, but also lead to necessary changes for overall program improvement.

This study, situated within a larger research and accreditation initiative, focused on how administrative interns bridge the gap between theory and practice as they describe their experiences engaging in clinical practice. The overarching research study is a cross-disciplinary effort of an educator preparation program at a large, private university in the Mid-Atlantic in the areas of teacher, administrator, and counselor preparation. This is a continuing effort for accreditation with the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), which is formerly the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). CAPE introduced the Transformative Pathways to accreditation in 2010. Transformative Initiative (TI) requires participating institutions to meet all required CAEP standards while at the same time submitting a formal and innovative research study that will advance knowledge of effective practices in educator preparation to inform the field. Institutions will use findings from the TI research project as part of the Transformational Initiative Plan three to five years prior to submitting the self-study report to CAEP and will earn "extra credit" when they meet all other accreditation requirements.

The research site of this study introduced TI in 2011. We believed that the focus on a unit-wide effort in accreditation would create opportunities for cross-program collaboration within the graduate school, allowing faculty members to develop course content, instructional materials, and internship opportunities broadly applicable to educator candidates from various disciplines including teacher education, counselor education, and educational administration. The appeal was that while all educators work in the same-shared setting upon completion of their respective programs, opportunities do not exist for common learning experiences during preparation years. Such insular tradition in educator preparation limits the candidate's capacity and impact as they address problems of practice whose complexity often demand a broader orientation stretching beyond a singular disciplinary prism. Through common Domain of

Interest and research foci, a unit-wide approach of the Transformational Initiative has the potential to create a collaborative inquiry for greater alignment between course curriculum, internships, standards and work demands educators. The TI research project envisions program completers' complex problems of practice as they occur in the shared space of the school setting, as well as their overlapping and converging roles as teachers, principals, and counselors.

Originating as separate studies in each discipline about clinical practice, this research evolved into a cross-case analysis to synthesize data across disciplines by utilizing an analytical framework consisting of four Domains of Interest. Additionally, this research aimed to provide further evidence of the value-added role of the TI pathway accreditation in improving educator preparation through clinical practice, and potential subsequent programmatic changes based upon lessons learned in the cross-unit research.

The research questions that guided this phase of research were: 1) In what ways do the Domains of Interest inform the candidates' perceived transformation from a role as a teacher to a role as future administrator through clinical practice, and 2) In what ways did candidates' experiences and the TI process provide lessons learned to influence overall program improvement?

Analytical Framework

In an effort to simultaneously engage administrator, teacher, and counselor preparation programs to deepen the knowledge and understandings of clinical practice within and across programs as part of the NCATE-TI project, an analytical framework was designed based upon emergent data from the separate studies. This paper will report the transition from the role of teacher to the role of future administrator, as described in current candidates' experiences in the following Domains of Interest: a) Assessment, b) Curriculum and clinical connections, c) Mentoring and supervision, and d) Context and design of clinical experiences (see Figure 1), as well as how these experiences and level of inquiry due to the TI pathway influenced program improvement efforts.
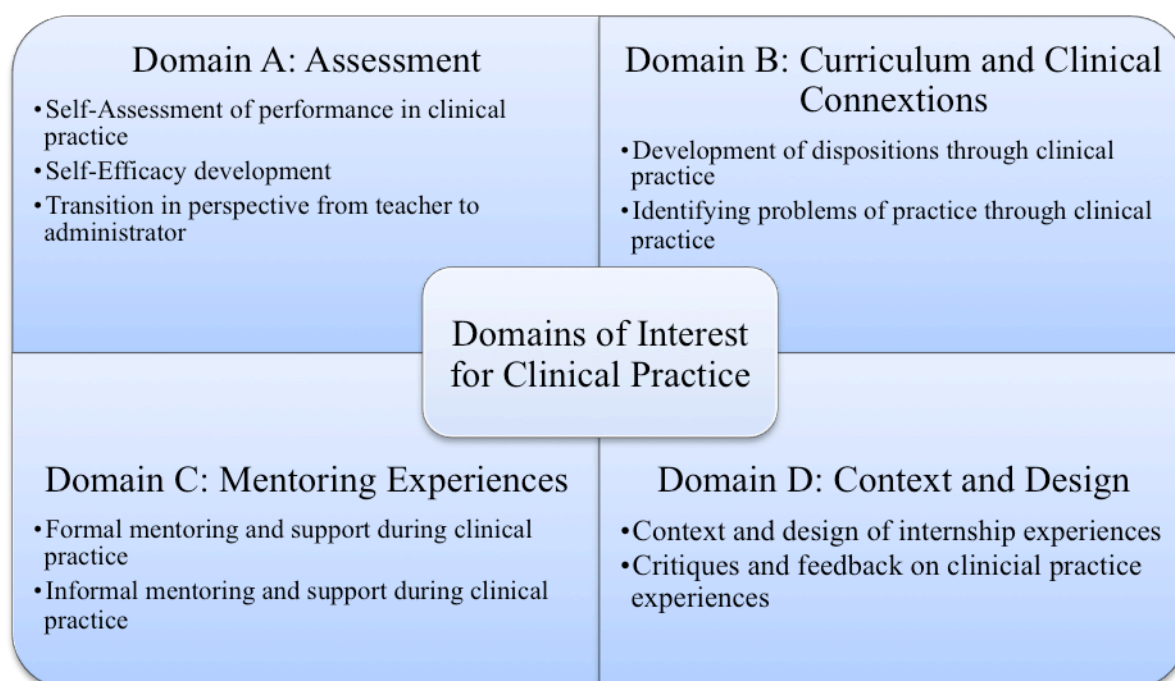
Domain A: Assessment

- Self-Assessment of performance in clinical practice
- Self-Efficacy development
- Transition in perspective from teacher to administrator

Domain B: Curriculum and Clinical Connextions

- Development of dispositions through clinical practice
- Identifying problems of practice through clinical practice

Domains of Interest for Clinical Practice

Domain C: Mentoring Experiences

- Formal mentoring and support during clinical practice
- Informal mentoring and support during clinical practice

Domain D: Context and Design

- Context and design of internship experiences
- Critiques and feedback on clinical practice experiences

Figure 1. The Domains of Interest for Clinical Practice. This analytical framework outlines the four Domains of Interest when analyzing clinical practice descriptions, perceptions, and experiences of educators enrolled in a university administrator preparation program.

Domain A: Assessment

This domain explicates the practice-based experiences designed to prepare educational leaders to assess growth and development using data-driven strategies. In this domain, aspiring administrators self-assess their progress throughout the program, and gauge changes in their own self-efficacy as they strive to cultivate and expand their knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Research on self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997) and adult learning theory (Knowles, 1968; 1980) informed the constructs of this domain for this research.

Domain B: Curriculum and Clinical Connections

Domain B uncovers curriculum designs that scaffold learning and connect theory to practice and vice versa by intentional bridging of content and pedagogy to balance subject matter learning and clinical experiences. Consistent with research highlighting notable principal preparation programs, the program in this study also assigns concurrent, course-specific clinical experiences embedded within classes so that students acquire practical experience that is aligned with standards-based course content (Bartee, 2012; Dishman & Redish, 2011; Orr, 2006; Perez, Uline, Johnson, James-Ward, & Basom, 2011). This domain was necessary to investigate candidates' experiences connecting practice and theory, and further, how they made meaning of those experiences to shift their perspective from teacher to administrator. The TI framework chosen for this investigation further solidified the triad among teaching/curriculum, research, and clinical practice.

Domain C: Mentoring and Supervision during Clinical Practice

Mentoring and supervision is a critical component of clinical practice; however, as recent research has highlighted, there are still inconsistencies in the quality and relevancy of the relationship between mentor and administrative intern during clinical practice (Bartee, 2012; Bowser, Hux, McBride, Nichols, & Nichols, 2014; Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2006; Geer, Anast-May, & Gurley, 2014; Jamison & Clayton, 2016; Jiang, Patterson, Chandler, & Cheung Chan, 2009). Jiang, Patterson, Chandler, and Cheung Chan (2009) found that successful implementation of the practicum experience for future educational leaders involves collaboration among the program candidate, the mentor, and university supervisors. This domain of interest guided inquiry regarding the impact of participant's interactions and relationships with mentors and university faculty during clinical practice experiences.

Domain D: Context and Design of Clinical Practice

This domain highlights the varying contexts and designs of clinical practice in educational leadership. Historically, administrator preparation programs have been criticized for not offering real world experiences to interns, instead only providing passive opportunities, such as observation (Fry et al., 2005). Improving upon these critiques, preparation programs have aimed

to provide more authentic field experiences for candidates. Findings under this domain provide evidence, or lack thereof, program designs that build upon one another in a developmental sequence under the supervision of skilled program faculty.

Methods

As the TI project evolved into a cross-case analysis in the areas of administration, teacher, and counselor preparation, the Domains of Interest framework supported cross-coding and identification of a common set of thematic codes using data collected in the first stage of research in each discipline. Originally, for educational leadership, data were gathered from 20 administrative interns enrolled in the final internship course of their program of study through semi-structured interviews and document analysis of the clinical practice experiences completed throughout the preparation program (Clayton, Jamison, Tekleselassie, & Briggs, 2017). Following the approval of all processes and protocols from the university Institutional Review Board (IRB), each participant was interviewed once while engaged in his or her full-time administrative internship, and documents reviewed included in the document analysis were course syllabi and rubrics for key clinical practice assessments that were embedded within each course in the administrator preparation program. In this study, staying consistent with existing norms in qualitative research design (Creswell, 2007), interview transcripts were re-coded using Atlas.ti software and analyzed through the lens of the Domains of Interest to examine how participants described their perceptions and experiences of clinical practice in each domain, and how those experiences, along with program feedback and suggestions for program improvement. Throughout this process, the researchers regularly engaged in conversations regarding emerging themes, overlapping codes, and findings. To establish intercoder reliability, each member of the research team coded independently via concept coding, and then compared, revised, and defined codes in order to achieve consistent results (Saldana, 2016).

Results

In analyzing data from semi-structured interviews through the lens of the Domains of Interest for preparing educational leaders through clinical practice experiences, several key themes emerged (see Figure 2). These included: 1) The shift in perspective from the role of teacher to the role of administrator (aligning with domains a, b, and d), 2) Clinical practice experiences provided strong connections to course content in some areas, and weak connections in others (aligning with domains b and d), and 3) The level of mentoring and support from internship mentors, although inconsistent, had a significant impact on how they experienced and made meaning of their clinical experiences (aligning with domain c).

Theme 1: The shift in perspective from the role of teacher to the role of administrator	• Domain a: Self assessment of performance in clinical practice, self-efficacy development, and transition in perspective • Domain b: Curriculum and clinical connections, development of dispositions, and identifying problems of practice • Domain d: Context and design of internships, and critiques and feedback on clinical practice experiences	
Theme 2: Clinical experiences provided strong connections to course content in some areas, and weak connections in others	• Domain b: Curriculum and clinical connections, development of dispostions, and identifying problems of practice • Domain d: Context and design of internships, and critiques and feedback on clinical practice experiences	
Theme 3: The level of mentoring and support from internship mentors, although inconcsistent, had a signicant impact on how they experienced and made meaning of clinical experiences	• Domain c: Formal and informal mentoring support during clinical practice experiences	

Figure 2. Resulting Themes as they relate to the Domains of Interest for Clinical Practice Framework. This figure outlines the relationship between findings and the four Domains of Interest when analyzing clinical practice descriptions, perceptions, and experiences of educators enrolled in a university administrator preparation program.

The Shift from Teacher to Administrator Perspective

Administrative interns in this study attributed their shift in perspective from teacher to administrator to their assessment of their own self-efficacy development during clinical practice experiences (domain a) as they relate to coursework and curriculum (domain b), as well as the quality of the context and design of throughout their degree or certificate program in educational leadership (domain d). The shift in perspective from the role of teacher to the role of administrator was not a seamless process for some of the participants in this study; however, many described experiences during clinical practice that influenced this shift, especially in the areas of legal acumen, visionary leadership, and instructional leadership. One intern expressed,

> My philosophy of education has changed dramatically. One was from a teacher's point of view wanna-be-administrator and now I'm at the end and it's taken a different turn as almost all administrator philosophy and where I want to go as a leader.

Reflecting upon coursework experiences that influenced the mental transition from teacher to administrator, one participant shared:

> We had a lot of visitors. We had a lot of superintendents, assistant superintendents, principals, and assistant principals. We went to schools. I think in the beginning, just hearing the demands of the job itself, it seemed a bit overwhelming. But now, going through the entire process over the last year, and starting to feel more confident, and starting to have to envision myself, what I would be like as an administrator . . . that has been something that I've learned that has changed; my perspective.

When describing the internal struggle she faced as a teacher with this transition, another administrative intern stated:

> It's making that switch from the teacher hat to the administrative hat. It was a slow transformation for me because I felt like taking off the one hat banned me from the other club. So, I felt like once I became an administrator, it's us against them, but it's really not us against them. We're all one.

Regarding her ability to recognize and address problems of practice, another participant shared, "You just see it through a different lens, and sometimes you're forced to." She continued by saying that when making presentations in her classes, her professors would say, "Okay, when you present this, you're an administrator. You're not a teacher." She laughed and continued, "So now I look at everything . . . through an administrative lens . . . how am I going to deal with this problem?" These perspectives also informed our effort as a preparation program to better identify and address the experience levels and individual needs of candidates in order to provide diverse experiences in order to encourage higher levels of self-efficacy and an administrative mindset. As such, the program began to reconsider the admissions process, induction process, and intentional interactions leading to the mindset shift during the program. For example, all interns meet individually with their instructors at the outset of the internship course. The purpose is to unearth areas of strength ad areas for growth and to engage the intern in planning activities and experiences that allow for reinforcing strengths, but mitigating weaknesses. Careful selection of mentors, where districts allow input, is also a shift emanating from this work. Specific mentors with certain leadership styles have been matched to interns needing that exposure and learning. Lastly, reflective practice is embedded in all course assignments and in the major key assessments. This reflection asks students to reflect upon each project from a lens of how they are developing as leaders.

Similar to Browne-Ferrigno (2003), this study also found that role-identity transformation (p. 488) was a significant piece of participants' professional growth as aspiring administrators. Some participants expressed the struggle of letting go of their teacher identity and embracing their identity as an educational leader. Others now only see themselves as administrators and fear that they will have to return to the classroom due to not obtaining an administrative position. An implication of this finding for practice is that school districts must be invested in developing awareness of teachers who wish to be administrators and developing them professionally to take on these roles, especially after they obtain administrative credentials. Additionally, university preparation programs should encourage students to pursue leadership positions in their work setting in order to gain experience and exposure on committees or within their department or grade level. Building in these experiences into internships and asking students, for example, to serve on school and district based improvement teams, leadership teams, or strategic planning teams afford them opportunities for growth and interaction with administrators in the field. Principal panels and guest speakers utilized in class also help students gain access to leadership

opportunities and discussions about time management and initiative to advocate for experiences are intentional and emphasized by advisors.

Curriculum Connections to Clinical Practice

Participants in this study described experiences with clinical practice closely aligned to coursework as a vehicle to strengthen their knowledge, skills, and dispositions in school leadership (domain b) and also offered critiques and feedback on the context and design of clinical practice experiences (domain d). Many students cited the experiences from the School Law and Policy class, as well as internship opportunities in Instructional Needs Analysis to be beneficial to understanding school leadership. Of her clinical experiences in the School Law and Policy course, one student shared:

> That was eye opening from beginning to end . . . I got a chance to see things that you cannot say or should not do, and the things that you should do to involve parents, involve the community . . . even with the faculty and staff, things you should follow, things that you should say and not say.

Another intern stated, "School law taught me why principals do what they do and how different cases throughout history have affected precedents that were set and that principals have to follow those." When considering her current administrative experiences, one student reflected upon the relevancy of course content in the School Law class.

> Always keeping in the back of my head the school law and policies for everybody. Parents' rights, due process when I'm talking with the children, for discipline issues. All of those things have been very beneficial when doing my internship.

Many interns expressed the benefits of conducting teacher observations in order to assess curriculum alignment and work with a teacher on instructional improvements.

> Using observations as a tool to promote change versus punitive . . . It really makes you think about, what am I saying to this person? How can I help them grow as a professional versus point out everything that they did that wasn't correct?"

Another participant shared:

> I think that in a principal's or a supervisor's observation in the classroom, building relationships with teachers [and] transferring the theory actually applies the most there because as an administrator, . . . you're leading people. So in the classroom, being able to grow a teacher by going in, observing the implementation of lessons and earning that teacher's trust so that they can actually listen to the things you're directing them to do or instructing them to do so that they can grow and the students, most of all, can grow.

Conversely, many candidates also shared administrative tasks they were not exposed to during clinical practice, such as budgeting and scheduling, consequently leading to lower self-efficacy in those areas. "I do understand that budgeting is something that in the future, when you're a building principal, and not so much an assistant principal, but I think that's important . . . we didn't really talk much about budgeting." Another intern expressed:

> If someone said to me, "You're responsible for a budget," I don't think I would completely understand what they were saying . . . I think having more classes with those types of scenarios and understanding how the budget process works . . . would be helpful.
>
> Consistent with the findings of Bartee (2012), Clayton and Myran (2013), and Jiang et al.

(2009), authentic, practice-based internships and classroom experiences that are closely aligned

are the most relevant to aspiring administrators. This finding also speaks to the beneficial process of the Transformative Initiative pathway because it provided data that influenced continuous improvement in educator preparation by highlighting areas of close alignment between coursework and clinical practice, as well as areas where those two elements were more loosely coupled. The program also began conversations to collaborate with teacher education to allow those in leadership preparation gain practice in supervision and teacher feedback by working with student teachers it the same university. By leveraging such opportunities, which might seem like easy connections, the program actually broke barriers long in place that did not foster such collaboration internally in schools of education.

Mentoring and Support during Clinical Practice

When considering the overall impact of clinical practice for participants in this study, mentoring, supervising, and support offered to candidates from internship mentors were highlighted inconsistently during participant interviews (domain c). Some felt supported and trusted by their mentors, and others felt they were held back from administrative experiences due to their mentor withholding access to certain aspects of the job. Of choosing to select her mentors for clinical practice experiences through the program, one participant shared, "I made sure I picked different people so I could take a little bit from everybody to see what I liked and what I didn't like. I didn't want to limit myself to just one mentor." An intern who was assigned a mentor stated, "She made sure that I experienced every part of administrative work . . . so I feel that she has made me a well-rounded administrator." Another participant who was assigned a mentor expressed, "He's going to be there for me and he's going to end up becoming, by the end of [my internship], he's going to end up becoming someone that I feel is going to really help me a lot [in the future]." Some interns described the promotion benefits of working with mentors in their school.

> She's making sure that I get all this experience now, so that when the [assistant principal] retires next year . . . I can be promoted into her position. So it's nice to work for that person . . . I've been with her for six years. She promoted me from teacher to department chair and then into school improvement specialist. It's nice to have somebody who is mentoring you professionally that's looked out for me.

Another intern shared of working with a mentor:

> They're kind of the gatekeeper. You can have all of these experiences or . . . [they say] "Do this, this, and this, and please just stay out of my way." I think that still has to be primary because they really control how many different experiences you're going to get. Are you going to be in charge of busses or are they in charge of busses and you help? Are you going to get to call the parent and deal with the problem or are they going to do it?

> This theme led the researchers to explore further options in mentor selection, training, and support before and during the administrative internship, influenced by the goal of continuous improvement as an aspect of the Transformative Initiative. The internship handbook has been expanded to include suggestions to mentors about activities and reflective experiences. Mentors are now provided access to a video providing further explication and training on best practices in supporting aspiring leaders. This assumes a level of professional knowledge, but developmentally builds upon that experience. The program also holds annual meetings with all internship instructors to gain feedback about the course and procedures and to ensure course consistency across sections.

Scholarly Significance

Findings from this study will not only add value when synthesized with findings from teacher preparation and counselor preparation programs as a part of the NCATE-TI accreditation pathway, but also have significance in the literature on university preparation programs and the administrative internship, as well as implications for practice at the university and school district level. Although these findings from a study conducted at one university may not have transferability to every university preparation program, the basic principals and fundamental need for more authentic internship opportunities should be in the prevue of all leadership preparation programs at the university level. The TI pathway stimulates reflective practice through research-based knowledge as institutions engage in major transformative changes and continuous improvement efforts. University programs preparing future school leaders should consider the alignment of coursework and internship activities to have the greatest impact on student learning, as well as analyze the quality and authenticity of clinical practice opportunities under the supervision of a carefully selected, trained, and experienced mentor.

We hoped that the TI approach would foster a collaborative research culture in the unit, leveraging the complementary expertise of diverse partners within the scholarship-practice ecosystem including research-active faculty members, professors of practice, and practitioners. Although this shift in thinking takes time to materialize fully, there is value-added when different groups of faculty members work together. For example, research-active faculty members bring theoretical, technical, and methodological skills that a scientific inquiry requires that the other groups may not have. Practitioners (who often serve as adjunct professors for this institution) bring situated, real-world experience to interpret, analyze and contextualize knowledge, making sense of the theory and data, adding fidelity and credibility to the overall TI research process. In addition, by virtue of their proximity (or local knowledge), practitioners understand the political, cultural and legal dynamics of the district when gatekeepers' buy-in is required to increase access to informants involved in the TI project. Last, professors of practice bring a unique dimension to the TI research project due to their dual and overlapping rapport to both practitioners and research-active faculty. They are the fulcrum who assist research-active faculty's ability to interpret and understand the nuances of local data, and context-bound knowledge in situated practice while enhancing the practitioners' space and horizon of understanding local evidence in light of best practice and research in the field.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the TI pathway proved to be the nexus between theory and practice in educator preparation at the university level. It also served as a de-balkanizing force to unify various research-active faculty groups committed to this work and to share best practices across preparation programs even within the same university. Although our efforts toward improvement continue, this process highlighted further areas of focus in administrator preparation, such as the selection and training of experienced mentors who will take a vested interest in the development of our candidates as future leaders, and providing more exposure to managerial aspects of school leadership, such as budgeting, staffing, and scheduling. This work influenced a more purposeful and intentional approach to improvement efforts and candidate growth, such as utilizing Professors of Practice who serve as liaisons between field sites and the

university, as well as field supervisors who expose candidates to authentic problems of practice. The TI requirements for authentic inquiry and clinical practice created the impetus for tangible and viable school-district partnership. Overall, this accreditation pathway has the potential to maximize the benefit from the TI research activity by creating opportunities and incentives that benefit all groups of faculty within the unit, thus creating a win-win scenario that has never existed before.

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