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Champion or Chump: Using a Book-Length Case Study to Evaluate a Mythical Principal

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This study examined how 130 participants enrolled in the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) principalship program completed a standards-based evaluation after reading a book-length case study of a mythical principal. Application of the Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL), which mirror the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) and Educational Leadership Constituency Council (ELCC) standards reveal widespread agreement on the principal's performance related to vision, instruction, management, collaboration and politics. However, participants were distinctly split as to the mythical principal's ethics. The authors discuss potential responses to literature that identify many programs as weak and inadequate by providing more authentic and rigorous experiences around ethics and other practical issues for preservice principals.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

An alarming number of scholars have concluded that many educational leadership programs fail to adequately prepare principals for reality (Farkas, Johnson, & Duffett, 2003). Levine (2005) called programs at many prestigious institutions "inadequate to appalling" (p. 23). The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) urged "departments of educational leadership to awaken from their complacency, reject the status quo and respond to appeals and criticisms from the field by identifying new content that addresses what principals need to know in order to do their jobs..." (2006, p. 11). Murphy (2006) concurred, noting that criticism of schools of education is most well founded when aimed at the preparation of administrators.

 Increasingly complex expectations for principals led Hess and Kelley (2007), to conclude that "principal preparation programs that pay little attention to data, productivity, accountability, or working with parents may leave their graduates unprepared for new responsibilities" (p. 14). Such criticism is not limited to scholars of educational leadership. Research suggests that many practitioners agree. Indeed, the authors' own experiences as practitioners support these conclusions.

Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, and Cohen (2007) cited a Public Agenda survey that showed 80% of superintendents and 69% of principals felt university educational leadership programs were out of touch with reality in today's schools. Hess and

Kelley (2005) noted a Public Agenda survey indicating that a whopping 96% of principals said their colleagues were more helpful than graduate school in helping them prepare for the job. If Whitaker (2012) is correct in asserting that the "principal is the decisive element in the school" (p. 22), we should be aghast.

Despite this harsh criticism, there is reason to believe that principalship preparation programs are heeding the call for improvement. For example, Orr (2006) identified encouraging changes in many programs, including an increased emphasis on constant reflection. In a well-received book addressing principal preparation, Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, and Orr (2010) identified promising model practices. Key among these was a relevant, well-developed and thoughtful curriculum aligned with state and professional standards. These programs embraced "active, problem-based learning that integrates theory and practice and stimulates reflection" (p. 50). They emphasized "action research; field-based projects; journal writing; and portfolios of evidence about practice that require feedback and assessment from peers, faculty, and the candidates themselves" (p. 50).

Darling-Hammond's team (2010) identified cohorts with mentoring and advising from experienced practitioners as essential. They also stressed the importance of structured, well-supervised internships "under the guidance of expert principals" (p. 50). Finally, they highlighted the importance of close relationships between K-12 schools and universities developing future principals.

The use of case studies and problem-based learning (PBL) has been identified as essential. Yin (2011) touted the value of case studies for students who, for example, "want to know about... How and why a high school principal has done an especially good job..." (p. 5). PBL, which draws its roots from the training of physicians, has been identified as a way to address common shortcomings of principal preparation (Bridges, 1992; Bridges & Hallinger, 1995; Copland, 2000).

Stein (2006), of the New York City Leadership Academy, advocated PBL as a promising way to prepare principals "...by having future school leaders address authentic problems that closely mirror the realities of the job, PBL enables them to develop the 'muscle memory' they will need to analyze complex systems even as they act within them" (p. 523).

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The principalship program at the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) enrolls students from across the state in two cohort groups. Students from Iowa's urban districts enroll in a program that exists as a partnership between the Urban Education Network (UEN) and UNI. This program was collaboratively developed in response to UEN districts' desire to "grow their own" administrators. "Large urban districts often need to grow their own leaders, as they require leaders that understand the urban community, the teachers' union, and the problems of large school size (Schneider & Zigler, 2007, p. 105). Students from Iowa's rural/suburban districts enroll in the "All-Iowa" cohort. Both groups engage in courses delivered through a blend of distance education technology, on-line, and face to face instruction and complete an extensive internship aligned with the Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL), which closely mirror the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) and Educational Leadership Constituency Council (ELCC) standards.

Students' initial course in the program introduces them to a balcony view of the principalship in a "societal context that is more dynamic and complex than in the past" (Crow,

2006, p. 310) through immersion in ISSL. Students examine the standards through selected readings, discussions, guest speakers, and development of a field-based internship plan supervised by campus and field-based faculty and a field-based mentor. Participants in this study were graduate students who were members of the UEN and All-Iowa cohorts during the 2008-2011 academic years.

In the fall of 2008 our team revised the syllabus to include Dunklee's (1999) *You Sound Taller on the Telephone*. The book traces mythical principal Grant Sterling through his career as an elementary, middle school, and high school principal. Throughout the 262 page book, the principal experiences authentic dilemmas ranging from personality conflicts and district politics, to wayward students, recalcitrant teachers, and difficult parents. The scenarios consistently produced lively discussions and debate.

At the end of the term participants completed an evaluation of Principal Sterling based on ISSL using an instrument provided by School Administrators of Iowa. It required them to cite specific evidence and criteria and also allows for reflection and comment. The instrument required participants to determine whether Principal Sterling was in need of small adjustments, more specific improvements, or remediation. In response to Darling-Hammond et al.'s (2010) call for greater interaction between students and expert practitioners, we invited a handful of practitioners to read the book along with students and share their own evaluations during the final class session.

DATA COLLECTION

After four years of data collection we wondered if participants' characteristics equated to different evaluations of Principal Sterling. For example, did participants with an elementary background evaluate him differently than their secondary counterparts? Did participants from a particular certification area see his performance differently? Was there a gender difference in terms of their evaluations? What about differences between the urban and rural/suburban participants? Did they view Principal Sterling to be deficient in particular standards?

After reviewing the data, we quickly determined that Standard 5 – Ethical Leadership was the only standard in which participants had markedly different judgments (Chi Square (5) = 221.58, $p<.001$). As shown in Table 1, Principal Sterling maintained at least a 95% ($n = 123$) rating of "meets standard" in each of the other five standards (visionary leadership, instructional leadership, organizational leadership, collaborative leadership, and political leadership). However, for Standard 5 - Ethical Leadership, only 55% ($n = 72$) of the participants judged him as "meets standard."

As we reviewed the assessments of Sterling's performance related to ethics, we examined participant demographics. Included in our population of participants that completed the evaluation were: 41% (n = 53) elementary teachers; 52% (n = 68) secondary teachers; and 7% (n = 9) termed 'other,' referring to participants employed in district central offices or educational service agencies. Of the forty-five percent (n = 58) of participants who determined that Principal Sterling "does not meet" standard 5 for Ethical Leadership, 55% (n = 32) were secondary teachers and 38% (n = 22) were elementary teachers. The total number of participants were evenly split between male and female (n = 65). Of the 58 participants who determined Principal Sterling did not meet the ethics standard, 55% (n = 32) were male and 45% (n = 26) were female. While this finding intrigues us, Jackall (1988) asserted that research into gender differences and ethical decision making provide conflicting results.

Table 1
Summary of Standards and Student Ratings (n = 130)

Standard	Standard 1 Visionary Leadership	Standard 2 Instructional Leadership	Standard 3 Organizational Leadership	Standard 4 Collaborative Leadership	Standard 5 Ethical Leadership	Standard 6 Political Leadership
# of students – meets standard	128	123	126	128	72	128
% of students – meets standard	98.5	94.6	96.9	98.5	55.4	98.5
# of students – does not meet standard	2	7	4	2	58	2
% of students – does not meet standard	1.5	5.4	3.1	1.5	44.6	1.5

We also examined participants' teaching experience in categories of: 0-4 years; 5-9 years; 10-14 years; 15-19 years; and 20+ years. Three of the five categories were relatively equal with regard to the number of participants choosing "meets standard" or "does not meet standard." The largest discrepancies came in the "10-14 years of teaching" and the "15-19 years of teaching" categories. These participants with more teaching experience were more likely to judge Principal Sterling as having met the standard. This finding interests us relative to research performed by Benninga, Sparks, and Tracz (2011) who found that teachers' moral judgment does not improve over time.

We also wondered if participants with certain undergraduate majors tended to evaluate Principal Sterling differently. Data indicated that the undergraduate major of our participants appeared to have no impact on their judgment of Principal Sterling. Likewise, participants' urban/suburban/rural background had no impact on their judgment of his ethical decision making.

DISCUSSION

Requiring participants to evaluate Principal Sterling has deepened their understanding of ISSL. While some viewed his actions more favorably than others, we found nearly unanimous agreement that Principal Sterling met the standards related to vision, instruction, management, collaboration and politics. Some felt strongly that Sterling was a model administrator from whom they could learn a great deal. Many admired his firm, direct style and felt convinced that his heart was consistently in the right place. Others saw him as sometimes careless and sloppy, mired in management and criticized the small amount of attention he gave to instruction. These debates were lively, impassioned and rich in their connections to the standards.

That nearly half of the participants found Principal Sterling to have failed to meet ethical standards revealed a more complicated reality. This discrepancy suggests students in principalship programs need additional opportunities to explore authentic ethical dilemmas. Being required to *justify* their judgments of Principal Sterling's ethical conduct by citing specific standards and criteria caused participants to more actively engage in the complicated, nuanced and sometimes conflicting ethical dilemmas principals routinely face.

The lively debate around how participants arrived at their judgments of Principal Sterling's ethical behavior mirrors the reality of the principalship. An ethical dilemma, as suggested by Kidder (1995), is not a choice between right and wrong, but rather, between two rights. Principals navigate this every day. Class discussions reflect Kouzes and Posner's (2007) assertion that "we want our leaders to be honest because their honesty is also a reflection upon our own honesty" (p. 32). Evaluating Principal Sterling's ethics reflects on students' own practice.

This study helped to affirm two important benefits to our program. First and foremost, it has provided our students with a relevant and engaging look into the principalship and the standards that govern it. Second, it has allowed our program to respond to the aforementioned criticisms of principal preparation. We have applied Darling-Hammond et al.'s (2010) recommendation that students' experiences be tied more explicitly to standards using an active approach that integrates theory and practice, while encouraging reflection.

It is surely not possible to separate a solid understanding of ethical practice from the increasingly complex responsibilities of school leadership, such as sensitivity to growing diversity in schools, and skill at forming collaborative relationships that support teacher growth and student learning (Jazzar & Algozine, 2007; Taylor, Pressley, & Pearson, 2002). Effective ethical practice requires principals to understand that a productive school climate impacts teacher morale (Black, 2001) and student learning (Brunner & Greenlee, 2000). Immersing students in the practical application of standards is essential. Heeding calls for more relevant preparation, reflection, and immersion in standards builds better principals and programs alike.

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