

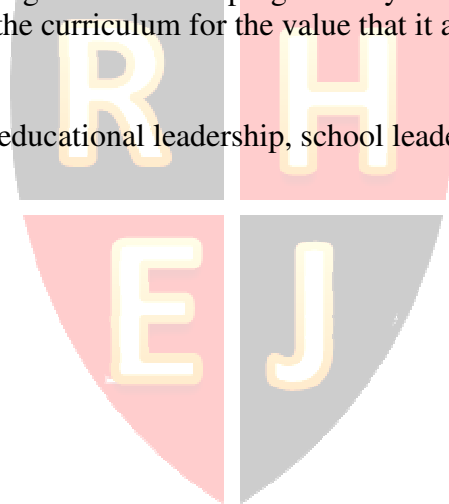
The frequency of assistant principal coursework in educational leadership programs

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which the assistant principalship is addressed in educational leadership program curricula through coursework in state-approved programs operating in a southern state in the United States. A survey was administered to Educational Leadership program directors, and gaps were found between what directors indicated on the survey and the course offering in their programs. The majority of directors indicated a need for an AP course in Educational Leadership programs, however, survey results revealed that an AP course is not required in any participant's program and is only offered as an elective course in one of the programs. Educational Leadership faculty members looking to develop a new program or redesign their current program may look to explore offering a formal "assistant principal" course in the curriculum for the value that it adds for various program stakeholders.

Keywords: assistant principal, educational leadership, school leadership, principal preparation, assistant principal coursework



INTRODUCTION

Generally, an educational leadership program graduate enters an assistant principal (AP) position prior to becoming a school principal (Glanz, 2004). It is rare that a graduate from an Educational Leadership (EDL) program enters directly into a principal position as the first destination administrative post. If an AP position is the usual entryway to a principal position in the school districts served by an educational leadership program, should EDL program faculty address the AP position in their curriculum? Do they?

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which the assistant principalship is addressed in educational leadership program curricula through coursework in state-approved programs operating in a southern state in the United States.

BACKGROUND

When the state Legislature mandated changes to approved educational leadership programs, faculty at a small, private university redesigned their curriculum accordingly. While doing so, the faculty also wanted to customize the program as much as possible while still complying with state requirements. During the planning process for the redesign, it was determined that a course specific to the Assistant Principalship (AP) was needed in the curriculum. Candidates are deliberately screened for the program on the front-end, and as a result, 100% of students admitted to the program aspire to the principal position. As such, faculty recognized that if graduates from the program do not succeed in the AP role, they will never make it to a principal position. Therefore, the rationale for the AP course was that the program had a responsibility to its students to prepare them for a role that the faculty members knew that they would assume when they left the program. To faculty members, it did not seem that the program was preparing students fully, if it did not include coverage in some manner, for their next employment destination—the AP position.

Including the AP course in the curriculum was not without its challenges. Because state mandated changes required that numerous, specific competencies and skills be covered in approved programs, program faculty had to be circumspect about what was ultimately included in the redesigned program. As part of the redesign, faculty employed an integrated curriculum design that allowed them to combine courses and integrate the competencies within the courses. Doing so enabled the faculty to include the AP course in the curriculum without having to offer a program that was undesirably lengthy.

For several years, the researcher's institution has offered the AP course in its curriculum. General feedback from local school district personnel and from student course evaluations has been positive. Due to the positive feedback and interest in ongoing course and program improvement, faculty members were curious to find out if and how other programs addressed the assistant principalship in their coursework. This curiosity, coupled with the absence of pertinent literature, underpinned the decision to conduct this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a dearth of research literature available on the role of the assistant principal (Weller & Weller, 2002). Some of the available AP literature addresses areas such as AP professional development needs (Allen & Weaver, 2014); AP work life (Hausman, Nebeker,

McCreary, & Donaldson, 2002); and suggested usage of APs beyond managerial or operations roles (Hilliard & Newsome, 2013; Kaplan & Owings, 1999). Another area of focus found in the available AP literature relates to AP perceptions relative to the following: the transition to the new administrative role (Armstrong, 2015); daily job duties (Barnett, Shoho, & Oleszewski, 2012); the effectiveness of university educational leadership programs (Johnson, 2016; Peters, Gurley, Fifolt, Collins, & McNeese, 2016).

Dyer (1991), indicated that there is scant mention of the AP role in educational leadership preparation programs. Accordingly, this researcher found Dyer's contention accurate. A Google Scholar search and an EBSCO search for this present study, specifically for "assistant principal coursework" and "assistant principal coursework in educational leadership programs" yielded zero results. Though some literature relative to AP coursework in Educational Leadership programs may possibly be found in studies addressing other aspects of the AP or EDL programs, there is a paucity of literature with the primary focus on coverage of the AP in EDL curriculum. The present study sought to address this gap.

The literature on the principalship is widely available. Hess (2007) conducted a thorough investigation of the content of university principal preparation programs in US; there is no mention of an AP course in curricula in his work. Further, literature that reports that graduates are not adequately prepared for the principalship through their educational leadership programs is abundant (Farkas, Johnson, & Duffett, 2003; Levine, 2005). If graduates are not prepared for the principalship through their educational leadership coursework, it is likely that they also are unprepared for the assistant principalship.

SURVEY QUESTIONS

To achieve the study's purpose, a ten-question survey in the form of a questionnaire was administered to a purposive sample of program directors or representatives of educational leadership programs operating in the state. The questionnaire was pilot tested with two EDL instructors. Each survey question had a space for comments in an effort to also gather the directors' basic perceptions about the same question and to further describe if, and how, the role of AP is covered in EDL coursework. "In survey research, investigators ask questions about peoples' beliefs, opinions, characteristics, and behavior" (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorenson, 2010, p. 372).

Participation in the brief survey was voluntary and without compensation. All findings of the survey are reported herein anonymously and the identity of participants has been kept confidential. Completion of the survey signified the participant's informed consent and the same was indicated on the survey. After securing IRB approval, the researcher made the electronic survey available to directors or program contacts of 16 state-approved educational leadership programs operating in the state. Nine surveys were returned for a response rate of 56 percent. At the time that the survey was administered, 17 approved programs were operating in the state, however, the researcher's institution was excluded from the survey.

THE SURVEY

Survey questions to achieve the overarching purpose of the study follow:

1. A course titled the Assistant Principalship is required in your program.
2. A course titled the Assistant Principalship is available in elective in your program.

3. The assistant principalship is addressed to some degree in another course in your program
4. In your opinion, does your program prepare graduates for the assistant principalship?
5. Other than job title and salary, do you think the role of the assistant principal is different from the role of the principal?
6. In the district in which your program places the highest number of graduates, in what role listed below do most AP duties fall? (Response choices: Disciplinary, Instructional Leader, Staff Developer, or Curriculum Specialist)
7. What percentage of your graduates who go into a school-based leadership position, enter the assistant principalship as the first step? (Response choices: 10% or fewer, 11-20%, 21-50%, 51-75%, or over 75%)
8. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statement: “Assistant principals require little formal training in graduate school because all they need they need to know can be learned on the job” (Glanz, 2004, p. 141).
9. The recently revised [Leadership Standards] to which your program is aligned addressed the assistant principalship.
10. There is a need for a course addressing the assistant principalship in Educational Leadership programs in [the state].

Survey questions 1-5 required yes/no responses, questions 6 and 7 asked respondents to select an answer from supplied response choices as indicated above, and questions 8-10 used a Likert scale of responses that included strongly agree, agree, somewhat agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. A space for comments was included in all questions.

FINDINGS

Nine (100%) of the participants indicated that an assistant principalship course is not required in their program; one respondent indicated that an assistant principalship course is available in their program as an elective course. Six of nine (66.67%) respondents indicated that the assistant principalship is addressed to some degree in other courses in the programs. One respondent commented that the AP was discussed in all courses in their EDL program. Eight (88.89%) of nine respondents indicated that their program prepares graduates for the assistant principalship and commented that the AP was embedded in courses in the program. One respondent indicated that their program does not prepare graduates for the assistant principalship. The respondents who indicated that their programs prepare graduates for the assistant principalship, posited that the programs do so through activities such as case studies, guest speakers and the practicum experience. One respondent commented that there is a need for more broad leadership experiences [than just the AP] and another indicated that their program prepares graduates for a number of leadership roles, however, not specifically for the assistant principalship. Further, directors were unanimous in indicating that the assistant principal position is different from the position of principal. Fifty percent of directors expressed that their graduates who enter the AP position assume the role of a disciplinarian, while 33.33% indicated the role of instructional leader, 0% indicated staff developer, and 16.67% indicated the role of curriculum specialist. Moreover, directors indicated that their graduates go into a variety of positions as the first administrative position—not all go into an AP position. Eighty-nine percent of respondents indicated some measure of agreement that the leadership standards to which approved programs align address the AP. All, (100%), of the directors indicated some measure of disagreement that APs learn all they need to know through on the job training (50% responded disagree and 50%

responded strongly disagree). The majority of directors (56%) indicated some measure of agreement that there was a need for an AP course in the EDL curriculum.

DISCUSSION

Given the fact that the majority of directors responded with some measure of agreement that there is a need for a course addressing the AP in EDL programs, it was interesting that none of the programs require the course, and only one program offers an AP course as an elective. This finding represents a gap between what the majority of faculty directors believe about AP coursework and what is actually offered in EDL programs.

Further, considering that no programs require a formal AP course, and 44% of the respondents indicated some measure of disagreement that an AP course is needed in EDL curricula (33% disagreed and 11% strongly disagreed), it was noteworthy that none of the respondents indicated agreement with Glanz's question, "Assistant principals require little formal training in graduate school because all they need to know can be learned on the job", (p. 241), If EDL directors do not consider the assistant principalship an on-the-job training position, it stands to reason that the option for AP training is in the university preparation program. This finding represents another example of the gap between what the majority of directors indicated on the survey and the reality of what is offered in their EDL programs in terms of formal coursework relative to the AP.

How would the EDL discipline, or faculty members who are developing new programs or redesigning existing programs respond to Glanz question on the survey? The question follows: "Assistant principals require little formal training in graduate school because all they need to know can be learned on the job", (Glanz, p.241). If the discipline agrees that the AP is not simply an "on-the-job training" position, should it not be covered in EDL programs in a formal way through coursework?

CONCLUSION

This brief study sought to uncover the extent to which the assistant principalship is covered through coursework in educational leadership programs in a southern state. Respondents to the survey were educational leadership program directors or their representatives. Based on the gap between the director's beliefs about AP courses and the lack of the courses in EDL programs, it is evident that more study of the coverage of the AP in educational leadership program coursework is warranted.

Learning more about if and how educational leadership programs address the assistant principalship in coursework can be beneficial to the discipline and university programs. The discipline benefits because study of this sort adds to the scant assistant principalship literature and to the larger body of educational leadership literature in general. Further, exploration and findings relative to assistant principalship coverage in Educational leadership programs is generalizable across EDL programs. University programs can benefit from these findings because these findings can be integral to the design of new and redesign of existing programs. In a time where programs are looking to bridge the theory to practice gap in order to make programs more relevant, practical, and real-world, an AP course is worthy of exploration as it can serve as an actionable vehicle for doing so. University programs can gain additional benefit if an AP course is offered in the curriculum, because the course can serve as a demonstrable way

of responding to the needs of graduates. If program faculty know that their graduates are entering a specific leadership position, it is prudent to help prepare them for that role by specifically addressing it in the curriculum. This type of preparation is common to what is done in Schools of Education. Certainly, some could argue that EDL programs are not job training programs, but leadership programs to prepare students broadly for leadership. In response, it could also be argued that the thinking behind this sentiment contributes to the perception that EDL programs are too theoretical and not practical enough (Levine, 2005).

School districts and university graduate students stand to benefit if an AP course is included in the curriculum. School districts stand to benefit because they can collaborate with a university on the content of the course. There is not a universal AP job description, as it varies per district or even per school (Oleszewski, Shoho, & Barnett, 2012). Because the AP course is a flexible one, it is an ideal vehicle for collaborating with school districts through tailoring the content to meet local needs. And, graduate students stand to benefit through being educated in a real-world, relevant graduate program where theory and practice are actively bridged.

An AP course in the curriculum can benefit multiple stakeholders – the discipline, university programs and faculty, school districts, and students. The first step in realizing these potential benefits is through further examination of how the AP is addressed through coursework in the larger EDL community beyond that of a single, southern state in the United States.

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