

The Role of Context on Leadership Transition: Building to District-level Leadership

Samuel Fancera
William Paterson University, fanceras@wpunj.edu

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The Role of Context on Leadership Transition: Building to District-Level Leadership

A career in public school education offers individuals limited paths to promotion. In most local education agencies, educators are typically categorized as certified instructional staff, non-instructional certified staff, and administrative staff. For various reasons, opportunities for promotions within these categories of certification/licensure are also limited in many school districts. Therefore, educators who desire to climb school district hierarchies are often required to pursue graduate education to satisfy requirements to earn administrative certification/licensure that will qualify them to move up the organizational chart.

A common path of promotion for educators who desire to ascend a school district's hierarchy is to move from a role of instructional staff member to administrative staff member. Although in most school district's the position of teacher is the sole non-administrative, instructional staff position, some school districts offer instructional coach positions that provide additional opportunities for educators. Formal teacher leader positions also appear to be gaining traction in some school districts around the country, and these positions should begin to expand opportunities for promotion to educators in the non-administrative, instructional category. Contrary to the opportunities for instructional staff, many school districts have a variety of administrative positions for educators who hold this certification/licensure to pursue. Some examples of the more common administrative positions include department supervisor, assistant/vice principal, principal, curriculum supervisor, director, assistant superintendent, and superintendent, among others.

It is not uncommon for educators who pursue school leadership roles to hold several different positions throughout their careers. Some researchers have reported the most common path to the superintendency is teacher to assistant/vice principal or principal, then to central

office administrator, and finally to superintendent (Bjork et al., 2003). Although school boards hire nearly two-thirds of superintendents from either high school or district level administrative roles, more than half of superintendents bypass central office administrative roles completely (Davis & Bowers, 2018). The characteristics of central office leadership, however, varies, especially for superintendents (Bjork et al., 2018). Expanding the knowledge base about central office school leadership can help preparation program faculty better serve future school leaders, as well as to assist building-level leaders more deeply understand the preparation, content knowledge, and skills required to transition to district-level leadership.

Peterson et al. (2008) reported that most novice superintendents felt adequately prepared to meet the requirements and expectations of the superintendency, however, there are gaps in the school leadership literature regarding other central office administrators' perceptions of preparedness and experiences with transitions in leadership practice. Given the most common path to the superintendency flows through central office administration (Bjork et al., 2003), and school boards hire sitting assistant superintendents to fill more than 14% of superintendent vacancies (Davis & Bowers, 2018), it was worthwhile to use context responsive leadership theory to examine how an experienced school principal transitioned to the position of assistant superintendent.

The purpose of this study was to understand how a building-level leader utilized context-responsive leadership practices to facilitate the transition from a building to district-level school leadership position. The following central questions guided this study:

1. Does formal education or professional experiences have a greater influence on a district-level leader's external and internal school context literacies?

2. How do external and internal school contexts influence leadership during the transition from a building to district-level position?

Theoretical Framework

Bredeson et al. (2011) defined context-responsive leadership theory:

as practical wisdom in action, which reveals a complex mix of knowledge, skills, and dispositions appropriately deployed by effective leaders as they engage in fluid conversations with dynamic situational variables. Context-responsive leadership is expressed through action, the way the leader behaves, not any one predisposed style consisting of de-contextualized qualities or leader actions. (p. 20)

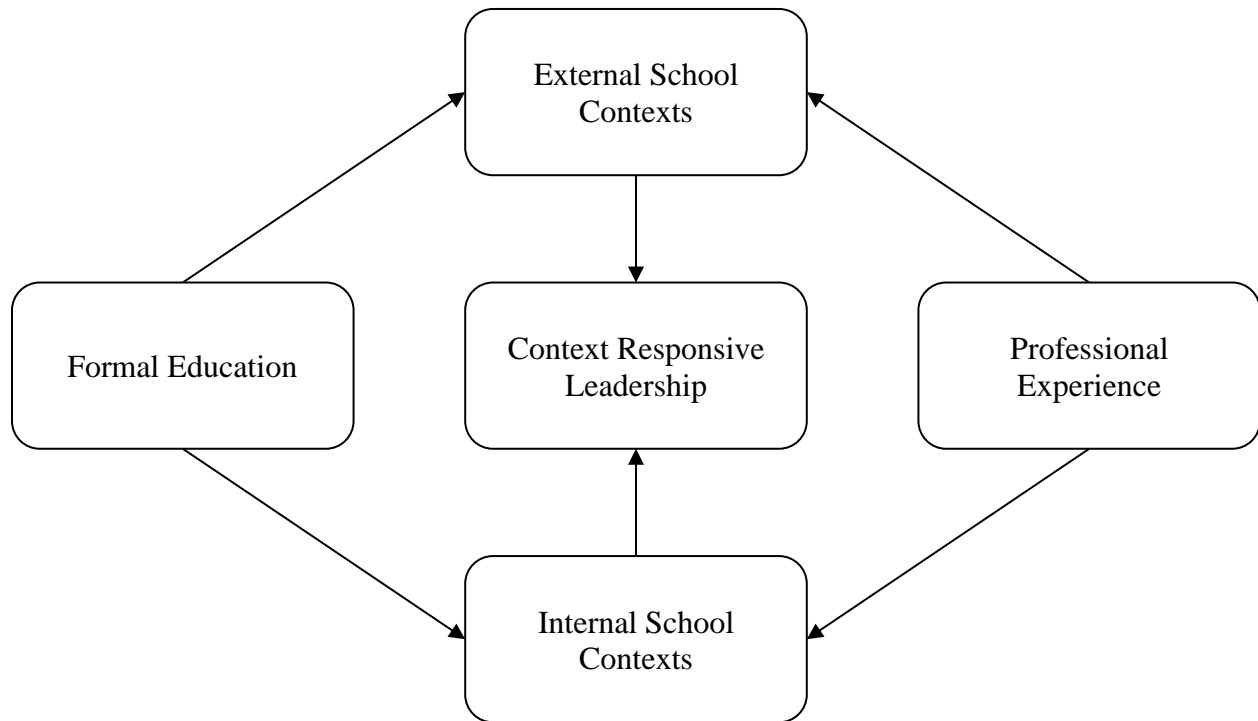
Context literacy is important for successful school leadership practice because it enables leaders to move beyond knowing what to do and helps them determine how to apply their knowledge of specific leadership models and styles to improve educational outcomes in their schools (Hallinger, 2018). The context-responsive leadership literature is, however, limited in the amount of empirical research to further apply and develop this theory (Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017; Fancera & Saperstein, 2021; Klar et. al., 2020; Oc, 2018). Scholars have studied the importance of context-responsive leadership for principals (Adebiyi et al., 2019; Angelle, 2017; Khanal et al., 2019; Klar & Brewer, 2013, 2014; Klar et al., 2020; Okilwa & Barnett, 2018; Pashiardis et al., 2018; Reed & Swaminathan, 2016) and superintendents (Bredeson et al., 2011, 2009; Roegman, 2017) regarding general school improvement processes, as well as for building and district-level administrators to improve their data informed practices (Roegman et al., 2018). Context-responsive leadership researchers have given little attention to how other building and district-level leaders use their context literacies to become more efficacious in their positions. Therefore, there was a need to fill this gap in the literature by studying how an assistant

superintendent transitioned from the principalship using context-responsive leadership theory.

Figure 1 illustrates the context-responsive leadership conceptual framework for this study, which builds on the framework previously developed by Bredeson and Klar (2008).

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



The unidirectional arrows indicate that formal education and professional experience influence external and internal school context literacies, and both external and internal school contexts influence context-responsive leadership. A review of the literature specific to context-responsive leadership theory follows.

Leadership in Context

Leadership scholars have given attention to contextual leadership to examine “whether situational or contextual factors lessen or enhance the impact of leadership practices” (Oc, 2018, p. 218). Differing contexts demand different types of leadership, and the situational nature of context-responsive leadership enables different types of leaders to emerge from different school and organizational settings. In a review of contextual leadership, Oc (2018) explained how context influences leadership, specifically about omnibus and discrete contextual factors:

There is no doubt that leadership takes place within a multilayered and multifaceted context. At the omnibus level, *where*, *when*, and *who* is being led, and at the discrete level, the *task*, *social*, *physical*, and *temporal* aspects of the context capture the context in which leadership is enacted. Furthermore, these omnibus and discrete contextual factors influence the process of leadership (e.g., leadership styles, follower attributions) and its resultant outcomes (e.g., leadership effectiveness, turnover intentions) and also shape the relationship between these. (p. 223).

The omnibus context and discrete context represent levels of context and serve as a framework to better understand the influence of context on leadership within an organization. Although this framework can help scholars study the influence of context on leadership, as well as how leadership might shape context, there seems to be little agreement regarding specific contexts for scholars to examine (Oc, 2018). This appears especially pertinent to the study of leadership in context as applied to schools because the literature presents inconsistencies about the various school contexts that might influence how school leaders practice their craft.

Bredeson et al. (2009) described the dimensions of school contexts to include “people, place, purpose, professional knowledge, and personalized roles” (p. 144) that influence how

leaders implement their knowledge and skills in practice. These school contexts seem to align with omnibus contextual factors – the who, where, and when. Hallinger (2018) identified six types of school contexts, which included institutional, community, sociocultural, political, economic, and school improvement, but did not further categorize these school contexts. These six types of school contexts align with the omnibus contextual factors, including institutional, community, political, and economic, as well as discrete contextual factors, such as sociocultural and school improvement. Roegman (2017) discussed organizational, personal, and occupational contexts in schools, while others presented their findings specific to school socioeconomic, educational, and family contexts (Pashiardis et al., 2018). Okilwa and Barnett (2018) examined societal level contexts, which included cultural values, social and economic trends, and governmental policies, as well as school level contexts, which included school community context. Clarke and O'Donoghue (2017) discussed situated, professional, material, and external contexts in schools and concluded “there remain many distinctive environments which warrant closer academic attention because of their implications for the situated understanding and exercise of school leadership” (p. 179). These previous works demonstrate that most researchers who examined context-responsive leadership in schools focused on the omnibus level of context – the where, when, and who – rather than the discrete level of context. Although some context-responsive leadership researchers examined discrete contextual factors in schools – the task, social, physical and temporal – these contexts do not appear to get much attention.

Others examined the influence of several school contexts, which included school enrollment, educational attainment, poverty level, and race, on educators' perceptions of preparedness for and expectations during the COVID-19 school closures (Fancera & Saperstein, 2021). This work focused on the omnibus level of context because these measures served as

proxies for the where, when, and who contexts. These factors were further categorized as external school contexts, because individual schools had limited to no influence on any of these measures. The researchers reported that one external school context – school enrollment – was positively related to educators’ perceptions of preparedness for the COVID-19 school closures that commenced during March 2020 (Fancera & Saperstein, 2021).

Method

I used qualitative research methods to study the context-responsive leadership of a first-year assistant superintendent who transitioned from the principalship in the same school district. I commenced participant recruitment and selection after the Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research at my institution approved this study. I used a purposive sampling technique to recruit one practicing school leader who transitioned from the principalship to the position of assistant superintendent in the same school district within the previous six months of this study’s commencement. I identified potential participants, and ultimately this study’s participant, through publicly available information and my professional network.

I began data collection upon receipt of the participant’s signed informed consent. I conducted eight semi-structured interviews between October and June during the participant’s first year of the assistant superintendency. These semi-structured interviews averaged 28 minutes in duration, which I conducted via telephone and in accordance with the semi-structured interview discussion guide included in Table 1 to better understand the participant’s level of preparation and transitions in leadership practice. Additionally, the semi-structured interviews allowed me to identify school contexts that were important to the study’s participant and to categorize them as either external or internal school contexts using either the omnibus level of context or the discrete level of context. One interview occurred during each of the following

months: October, November, January, February, March, April, May, and June. I transcribed each of the monthly interviews, read each transcript as a whole, and made notes about first impressions of participant responses. Then, I read transcripts individually to label relevant words, phrases, sentences, or sections to code the data. To conceptualize these data, I created categories based on the codes and labeled categories to describe any connections between the different categories. This analytic approach allowed me to understand how this leader utilized context-responsive leadership practices to facilitate the transition from a building to district-level school leadership position.

Table 1

Semi-structured Interview Discussion Guide

-
1. Please tell me about the activities/duties/tasks that you have engaged in during the past month, or since our last interview.
 2. Please describe how your formal educational leadership education experiences prepared you for the assistant superintendency with respect to completing these activities/duties/tasks?
 3. Please describe how your experiences during your time in the principalship prepared you for the assistant superintendency with respect to completing these activities/duties/tasks?
 4. Please describe the transitions in leadership practice, if any, you encountered while completing these activities/duties/tasks considering the expectations of the assistant superintendency compared to the expectations of the principalship?
 5. Please share any final thoughts regarding your perceived level of preparation and transitions in leadership practice required to complete the activities/duties/tasks you described above.
-

imitations and Delimitations

I designed this study to understand how a building-level leader utilized context responsive leadership practices to facilitate the transition from a building to district-level school leadership position through the lens of context-responsive leadership theory. Although the study's participant provided the data required to answer the central questions, the participant does not represent the perspectives of all district-level leaders who recently transitioned from building-level leadership. Additionally, the participant's educational background and school district profile does not represent those of all district-level leaders who recently transitioned from building-level leadership. Nevertheless, analysis of the data collected throughout the participant's first year of the assistant superintendency contribute to the development of context-responsive leadership theory as applied to schools.

Results

This study's participant is a sitting assistant superintendent in their first year in the position. They served as a principal at an elementary school in the same district for the eight years immediately prior to assuming this central office leadership position. Prior to the principalship, the participant served for two years as a building level supervisor. The participant served as a teacher for eight years prior to their two years as a building level supervisor. Table 2 includes a description of the study participant.

Table 2

Description of Study Participant

Pseudonym	Current Position	Prior Leadership Experience	Prior Teaching Experience	Total Years in Education
Lincoln	Assistant Superintendent	K-5 Principal (8 years) High School Supervisor (2 years)	High School Teacher (6 years)	17 years

Table 3 includes a description of the participant's school district. To maintain confidentiality of the participant's responses and to prevent identification of the participant, I used a pseudonym for the participant, rounded numbers and percentages to the whole, and referenced the U.S. Region in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 3

Description of Participant's School District

Student Enrollment	ED Students	EHL Students	NW Students	Number of Teachers	Number of Leaders	U.S. Region
14,000	32%	62%	65%	1,100	60	Northeast

Note. All numbers rounded to prevent identification of study participant; ED = economically disadvantaged; EHL = English as home language; NW = students identifying as non-white

This study's main finding indicates Lincoln perceives the leadership experiences they attained as a school principal as more valuable preparation to understand the external and internal school contextual factors, and to conduct the duties and tasks associated with this district-level leadership position, than their graduate level education in educational leadership. Additionally, Lincoln stressed their transitions in leadership practice mostly with respect to

educational leadership skills rather than educational leadership content knowledge. This main finding emerged from the specific themes, which includes: doctoral study stands alone; and leadership skills above content knowledge, in response to the semi-structured interview questions.

External and Internal School Contexts

Table 4 includes the external school contexts Lincoln identified during the eight semi-structured interviews. Lincoln identified seven distinct external school context factors to influence their district-level leadership practice. Table 4 also includes the influence of either formal education or professional experience on each of the school context factors, as well as the context level for each of the identified external school contexts.

Table 4

Participant Identified External School Contexts of District-level Leadership

External School Context	Influence	Context Level
1. Administrators' Association	Formal education	Omnibus
2. Board of education	Professional experience	Omnibus
3. District-level leaders	Formal education	Omnibus
4. Planning/preparation requirements	Formal education	Discrete
5. Principal colleagues	Formal education	Omnibus
6. Time demands	Formal education	Discrete
7. Communication requirements	Professional experience	Discrete

Lincoln identified seven distinct external school context factors. The two external school contexts that Lincoln describes as having a deeper understanding of due to professional experience as a principal are the board of education and communication requirements. Lincoln believes their formal education allows for deeper understanding of the other five external school

contexts they identified during the study. Four of the external school context factors that Lincoln identified are at the omnibus contextual level.

Table 5 includes the internal school contexts Lincoln identified during the eight semi-structured interviews. Lincoln identified five distinct internal school context factors to influence their district-level leadership practice. Table 5 also includes the influence of either formal education or professional experience on each of the school context factors, as well as the context level for each of the identified internal school contexts.

Table 5

Participant Identified Internal School Contexts of District-level Leadership

Internal School Context	Influence	Context Level
1. Ancillary resources	Formal education	Discrete
2. Hierarchy	Formal education	Omnibus
3. Policies	Professional Experience	Discrete
4. Procedures	Professional Experience	Discrete
5. Regulations	Professional Experience	Discrete

Lincoln identified five distinct internal school context factors. The three internal school contexts that Lincoln describes as having a deeper understanding of due to their professional experience as a principal are policies, procedures, and regulations. Lincoln believes their formal education allows for deeper understanding of the remaining internal school contexts they identified during the study, which includes ancillary resources and the hierarchy. Four of the internal school context factors that Lincoln identified are at the discrete contextual level.

Lincoln feels well-prepared for this assistant superintendency, primarily because they are familiar with the district's policies, regulations, and procedures. Overall, Lincoln believes their formal education at both the master's and doctoral degree levels prepared them well for a career

in school leadership. Although Lincoln perceives their formal educational experiences in school leadership at the doctoral level as better preparation for the assistant superintendency than formal educational experiences at the master's degree level, they found their master's degree program prepared them well to serve as a principal in this school district. Lincoln stated the availability of ancillary resources, including principal colleagues, other district-level leaders, the local administrators' association, other avenues to acquire answers to unresolved issues, and a focus on one building as reasons why their master's degree program was adequate preparation for the principalship.

Lincoln emphasizes that they utilize the educational leadership and other skills they gained throughout their doctoral program, which they completed at a doctoral institution with very high research activity, more than the educational leadership content knowledge they acquired throughout their formal graduate education in school leadership to meet the expectations of the assistant superintendency. Lincoln's master's degree program, which they completed at a master's college/university, provided insight regarding the expectations and requirements of a district-level school leadership position, but overall, the doctoral degree program provided clarity regarding the expectations, demands, and knowledge and skills required for such positions. Lincoln said, "to compare what my current responsibilities are and the level with which I was prepared in my master's program, I would say there's probably a solid disconnect. I would say they probably scratched the surface, and here I'm digging in."

Lincoln often references the workload required for the coursework and dissertation in their doctoral degree program prepared them for the many tasks they currently are involved with, not only from a content knowledge and educational leadership skills perspective, but also regarding planning, preparation, time management, and communication. They believe the

process of completing a doctoral degree at a research university was the best training they received to handle the rigors of this district-level leadership position. Lincoln often referred to the stepwise process required throughout their doctoral studies as excellent preparation for navigating the layers of hierarchy necessary to bring an initiative or decision to the board of education for approval. Lincoln shared, “the very nature of the rigor of the process, as opposed to the rigor of the content and the study...stands alone.”

Time management is a critical issue for Lincoln, which they identify as the biggest transition required in their leadership practice. The ability to prioritize issues that district principals bring is another transition Lincoln encounters. As a principal in the district, Lincoln was able to address most issues from students, teachers, parents, school community members, and district administrators when they encountered them. Now as a district-level leader responsible for the oversight of more than 20 schools, they find this level of efficiency nearly impossible. Lincoln said, “transitioning away from a micro-view as a principal to more of a macro-view in terms of district-wide oversight, it is certainly a transition.”

This district-level leadership position also requires Lincoln to improve their communication skills. They stated that although micro-managing was not something they regularly engaged in as a principal, the scope of this position does not even allow them to consider it. The size of this school district requires Lincoln to communicate with the principals more effectively, so they focus on issuing clear directives when needed, providing relevant information in a timely manner, and maintaining regular contact to keep the lines of communication open. Lincoln shared that from their experiences as a principal in this district, “being on the receiving end for so many directives, was a very big influence and shaped me in how I share information and how I ask for collaboration.”

Dealing with a governing body, the board of education, was a major transition that Lincoln had minimal exposure to as a principal. Lincoln's decisions are not always aligned with the expectations of individual board of education members. This presents difficulty for Lincoln when trying to move their leadership agenda forward, especially when Lincoln needs board of education approval for certain decisions. Lincoln understood this process as a principal, but they did not experience the intricacies of it as a building-level leader. Now, this process is a regular part of Lincoln's daily tasks.

Summary of Results

Central Question One

Lincoln perceives both formal graduate education in educational leadership and professional experience to have an influence on their external and internal school context literacies. Formal education has greater influence on Lincoln's perceptions of their external school context literacies than professional experience. Professional experience has greater influence on Lincoln's perceptions of their internal school context literacies than formal education.

Central Question Two

Lincoln perceives their external and internal school context literacies to influence their leadership practice during the transition from a building to district-level position. The overall responsibilities, duties, and tasks associated with the assistant superintendency require Lincoln to continually develop their general leadership skills. Lincoln perceives their formal graduate education at the doctoral level as better preparation to lead within these external and internal school contexts.

Discussion

My intent in this study was to examine one school leader's perceived level of preparedness and experiences with transitions in leadership practice that were necessary when promoted from the principalship to the assistant superintendency using context-responsive leadership theory. For the first central question, results indicate this school leader perceives both their formal graduate education in educational leadership and professional experiences to have an influence on their external and internal school context literacies. Formal educational experiences have more influence on this leader's perceived external school context literacies than do professional experience, however, professional experience has more influence on perceived internal school context literacies. As for this leader's formal graduate education in educational leadership, this district-level leader perceives their doctoral education and experiences as a principal in this district as adequate preparation to assume the responsibilities of the assistant superintendency. This leader, however, perceives their master's degree program in educational leadership as being less than adequate preparation for the current district-level leadership role.

For the second central question, this district-level leader perceives their external and internal school context literacies to influence their leadership practice during the transition from a building to district-level position. The overall responsibilities, duties, and tasks associated with the assistant superintendency require this leader to continually develop their general leadership skills to achieve some novice level of success. Again, this leader perceives formal graduate education in educational leadership at the doctoral level as better preparation to lead within these external and internal school contexts, which supports the findings from earlier study of context-responsive leadership in schools (Hallinger, 2018). This is primarily due to the participant's perception that their doctoral program allowed them to develop the general leadership skills that

are beneficial for the assistant superintendency. Findings in this study support an emphasis on general leadership skills, as well as standards driven educational leadership skills.

This study contributes to the school leadership literature by detailing the level of preparedness and transitions experienced by this school leader when examined using context-responsive leadership theory. More specifically, these findings indicate this district-level leader uses their formal graduate education and professional experiences to better understand omnibus and discrete level contexts to shape their leadership practice. This finding is supported by earlier context-responsive leadership research that examined the role of context in principal leadership (Adebisi et al., 2019; Angelle, 2017; Khanal et al., 2019; Klar & Brewer, 2013, 2014; Klar et al., 2020; Okilwa & Barnett, 2018; Pashiardis et al., 2018; Reed & Swaminathan, 2016) and district-level leadership (Bredeson et al., 2011, 2009; Roegman, 2018, 2017).

The participant in this study exhibits the wisdom to lean on their formal education and professional experiences to not only facilitate the transition from building to district-level leadership, but also to better understand the contexts within their leadership (Bredeson et al., 2011). Findings from this study builds on the work of others to further develop context-responsive leadership theory in schools (Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017; Fancera & Saperstein, 2021; Klar et. al., 2020), especially about the identification of external school contexts occurring mostly at the omnibus level and internal school contexts at the discrete level (Oc, 2018).

Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

More work is needed to continue building a research base that examines context-responsive leadership in schools. Specifically, research that examines the influence of external and internal school context literacies with both building and district-level leaders would be a worthwhile contribution to the literature. How these contexts at the omnibus and discrete levels

shape school leadership practice, as well as how leadership influences these school contexts is needed to further develop context-responsive leadership theory as applied to schools.

Another area of future research this study uncovered was the need to examine whether master's degree programs in school leadership, which are primarily tasked with developing building-level leaders, can incorporate district-level leadership knowledge and skills. It was clear from this study's participant that they perceive doctoral level graduate study as better preparation to understand these differing school contexts, but more work is needed to determine whether this perception holds within larger samples of district-level leaders, as well as in different district settings.

Conclusion

Findings from this study indicate this district-level leader uses their formal graduate education and professional experiences to better understand omnibus and discrete level contexts to shape their leadership practice with the transition from building to district-level school leadership. Formal educational experiences have more influence on this leader's perceived external school context literacies than do professional experience, however, professional experience has more influence on perceived internal school context literacies than do formal education. The overall responsibilities of the assistant superintendency require this leader to continually develop their general leadership skills, and this leader perceives formal graduate education in educational leadership at the doctoral level as sufficient preparation to lead within these external and internal school contexts.

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