A Survey of Lessons Learnt from COVID-19 by School Administration Interns

Precious Guramatunhu Mudiwa
Appalachian State University, mudiwap@appstate.edu

William M. Gummerson
Appalachian State University, gummersonwm@appstate.edu

Barbara B. Howard
Appalachian State University, howardbb@appstate.edu

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Cover Page Footnote

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In the United States, the federal government's responsibility for public education is to promote educational excellence, equal access, and enforce accountability of federal funding (USDE, 2020). The primary responsibility for public education, however, is left to the states under powers reserved to the people under Article X of the U.S. Constitution (1791). Each of the fifty states has established their own public school system, responsible for licensing teachers and school administrators. In the State of North Carolina, the requirements for principal preparation programs and licensure are sanctioned by the North Carolina Elementary and Secondary Act (N.C.G.S. § 115c-284, 2017). Principal interns are required to complete an in-person one-year internship at a school under the guidance of a principal.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges to schools forcing many to quickly transition to online teaching to ensure continuity of teaching and learning. Our school administration interns, who are also full-time working public school teachers, experienced these changes and were forced to radically adapt classroom pedagogy. As principal candidates working closely with principals, they were tasked with leading schools through one of the most difficult times in public education. For school administration interns, the pandemic provided an opportunity to learn important logistical skills about crisis management in schools, but for some the educational impact resulted in a loss of support from their supervising principal and less immersion into internship activities.

There are studies that investigated the experiences of interns in colleges and universities. In the United States, the Center for Research on Workforce Transitions (2020) launched the National Survey of College Internships (NSCI) and called for further research

that investigates "access, program structure and student outcomes" (para. 2). Two years into the pandemic, a similar study conducted in Chinese colleges revealed a higher level of anxiety among post graduates in academic degrees compared to post graduates in professional programs (Zhang et.al, 2022). Clearly, there is a need for comprehensive studies that are discipline focused as the NSCI and Chinese studies focus on a wider variety of fields. The first step should be for faculty to study the experiences of their own students during the pandemic to contribute to the research and to proffer solutions that promote quality enhancements that are program specific.

Given that backdrop, we surveyed two cohorts of school administration interns enrolled in the Graduate Certificate in School Leadership (GCSL) and Master of School Administration (MSA) Degree programs at a university in the southeastern part of the US. Successful completion of the certificate or the degree program leads to principal certification. The study had three purposes. The first was to learn about intern experiences of transitioning to online during COVID-19 as graduate students who were also working teachers. The second was to gauge the level of support administrative interns received from supervising principals and the principal preparation program faculty. The third was to utilize the survey results to inform the principal preparation program about the needs of interns in order to ensure their success during the pandemic.

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework of Internship Process
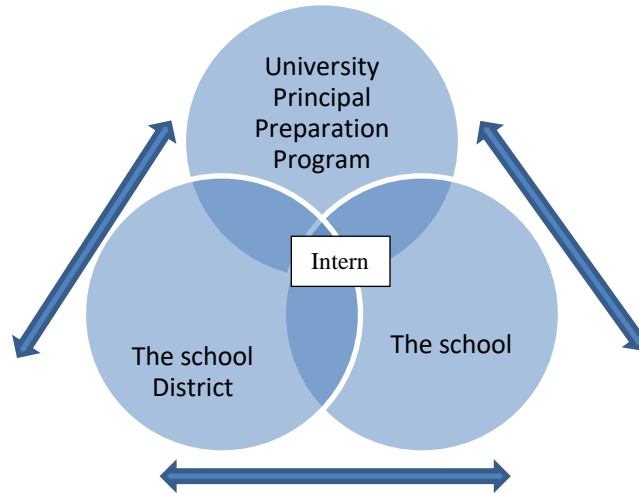
Note. The internship process is based on a strong partnership between the principal preparation program, the school and school district. Each entity provides support and guidance to the intern with a constant feedback loop between all organizations.

Effective internships are built on strong district and university collaboration (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Geer, 2020). Similarly, our internship process is predicated on a triad model of the university, school and district. The internship is completed in the school that interns currently work or in another school as necessitated by circumstances. In conjunction with a university professor who teaches the internship course, students are supervised during their field practice by a principal who is licensed by the state. This principal provides a letter of support to the university to indicate their willingness in mentoring and supervising the students. A memorandum of understanding (MOU) is also signed between the university and school districts. At the end of the internship, the principal supervisor evaluates the principal candidate's performance using leadership competencies that include: change, vision, relationships, caring, ethics, organizing and technology.

During the internship, students complete six projects requiring them to apply research

to practice based on the state standards for principal licensure. They also record their internship activities in an internship log—an Excel spreadsheet indicating the number and variety of state standards employed during their leadership activities. The internship course professor works with the interns to monitor progress, provides guidance in meeting the requirements of the projects and also leads four seminars with the interns each semester. The professor also communicates with the on-site principal supervisor to mentor the intern, appraise their work and provide support when needed. Our model is consistent with Deschaine and Jankens (2017), who recommend that internship activities include an "internship proposal, internship meetings, school profile, mentor observation internship log, professional portfolio, and performance assessments" (p. 17). Interestingly, there is great similarity between the internship processes of our program and that of Mombourquette and Bedardsto (2016), which include the use of state standards and internship activities performed by students.

Our students are required to submit an extensive e-portfolio intended to demonstrate their ability to apply research to practice. The e-portfolio includes formative course assignments and six summative capstone projects completed during the internship, an internship log as well as a Certificate of Competency signed by the principal, superintendent and professor, used to assess specific leadership competencies. This process is seamless and students usually perform beyond expectations.

Challenges from the Pandemic

The pandemic posed challenges to interns, professors, and supervising principals responsible for meeting the requirements of the internship. In the schools, teachers and students had to shift from many activities traditionally performed face-to-face to online

learning. Unfortunately, the transition in schools to online was not always an equitable

process or experience for all teachers and students due to inequities that existed prior to

COVID-19. These include:

- limited funding

- qualified teachers

- parental involvement and support

- nutrition

- health services

- effective principal support

- teacher collaboration and other factors negatively influenced the experiences

  of the interns, and

- adequate internet access

(Educators for Excellence, 2020; North Carolina Public School Forum, 2020)

The need to institute remote instruction to isolate families from public interaction in order to

reduce the spread of the Coronavirus, in conjunction with inadequate internet access,

exacerbated these inequities. As graduate students involved in an internship designed for

interaction with the day to day operations of administrators, teachers, and students, their

internship experiences were also adversely affected by these inequities.

Literature Review

The inequities that affect K-12 schools had spillover effects on internships for

university principal preparation programs. The purpose of an internship in principal

preparation programs is to provide critical immersion experiences that equip students with

transportable skills, tacit and explicit knowledge, attitude, and dispositions that prepare

students to assume leadership roles after graduation (Maertz et al., 2013). For academic

research taught in the classroom to be applied in schools, the research must consider how

schools operate (Caboni & Proper, 2009; Schneider, 2014). Effective pedagogy used to

develop school leaders during coursework and the internship must be driven by professional

standards and practitioner competencies grounded in research and practice (Darling-

Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Hoyle, 2005, 2007).

Purpose of Internships

The purpose of an internship is to provide students with authentic experiences 'in

which they grapple with the real demands of school leadership under the supervision of a

well-qualified mentor" (Burstein & Kohn, 2017, p. 113). The internship should equip

students with knowledge, skills, dispositions, and attitudes required for the job. The context

of the school during the internship experience can advance "interns from learning about

school leadership to participating in the intricacies of school leadership" (Wasonga &

Murphy, 2006, p. 162). Internships provide the first work experience where learning occurs

through close interaction, observation and participation leading to a deep dive into the mores

and culture of the job. Effective school leadership programs are standards-based, guided by a

theory of school leadership and a curriculum that addresses that theory, as well as a linkage

between theory and practice (Jamison & Clayton, 2016).

The curriculum must prepare students to lead by providing them with opportunities to

develop tacit knowledge (Wasonga & Murphy, 2006). Relationships between the interns and

supervisors must be strong enough to provide a rich space for feedback and an environment

that spurs the growth of the intern (Burstein & Kohn, 2017). The internship experience must

provide skills and knowledge that are transferable and enable students to work successfully

in different school settings and contexts. It must help them identify experiential gaps, interrogate their experiences, and spur their curiosity to learn. While the students work in schools under the supervision of university professors and principals, it is imperative for students to exercise self-regulation, proactivity and reflective practice to create a meaningful experience for themselves. Students are encouraged to conduct a self-assessment of their strengths and weaknesses based on leadership dispositions and seek new and challenging leadership opportunities while being guided by their supervising principals and university supervisors. An effective internship provides students with the time and space to apply academic knowledge learned in the classroom in a realistic school setting that they cannot practice within the university classroom (Maertz et al., 2013). Unfortunately, the pandemic not only caused disruption of many internship activities and programs, it also forced some programs to suspend their internships (Bugis, 2020).

Experiences of Educators During COVID-19

It is common knowledge that the health risks posed by the pandemic caused the cancellation of face-to-face instruction in K-12 education, community colleges and higher education, resulting in a move to online instruction. A national study by the Educators for Excellence (2020) with a sample of 508 revealed several problems faced by K-12 public teachers. Among the problems noted were inexperience with online learning, mental issues such as anxiety and depression, and spending more time on emotional issues. The study also revealed a widening of inequities, including:

- disparities in internet connectivity and speed
- lack of computer access
- lack of a quiet space to conduct lessons with minimal disruptions

- the need to spend more time than before on reaching out to students

- the need to spend more time on social-emotional support for students

- the need to make the curriculum accessible to all students

- extremely high levels of low student engagement

- lack of family members who can assist students with their learning needs, and

- the challenge of balancing work and family responsibilities while teaching simultaneously

Learning during the pandemic did not meet many of the needs for students of color, students from low income households, students living with physical disabilities, homeless students, and students with limited English proficiency (Educators for Excellence, 2020). Undoubtedly, the transition to online teaching brought a deluge of additional stressors to college students likely caused by pandemic fatigue, isolation, Zoom fatigue, fatigue brought by cabin fever, and fatigue of adaptive failure and high stress levels (Munsel et al., 2020).

At both the university and public school, students and instructors, despite being vulnerable, had to be resilient, while at the same time recognizing that some program requirements had to be adjusted to meet the new reality. For example, instead of completing the internship primarily on site, many programs had to work with students to develop tasks that could be completed with their schools and districts online. University students, graduate faculty and school administrators in the field, had to undergo additional training with online instruction and learning. The ease with which each could apply the technology to the internship, classroom instruction, and the operation of schools differed throughout the state. Those who operated in districts providing adequate technological infrastructure and training had little trouble making the transition, but school administrators and teachers who had never

employed or experienced online instruction experienced a steep learning curve, forcing them to hurriedly learn and apply new course delivery technologies.

Unfortunately, online learning frequently reduces intimacy and presence that is taken for granted in face-to-face instruction. Geirsdóttir et. al. (2020), who studied the impact of COVID-19 on instruction in Iceland agree, "There is some added value in what a student jokingly called the 'world of the flesh' (*kjötheimur* in Icelandic), referring to the physical world with the presence of people in the flesh that no technology can reproduce yet" (p. 12). In face-to-face learning environments, students and instructors can read each other's cues and instructors can quickly provide feedback in real time. This close interaction is a key component that is often lost, or is not available in online instruction. A failure to adjust can lead to adaptive failure and fatigue as well as stress and despair. The challenge for licensure programs, such as principal preparation programs, is to ensure that the quality of the program is not compromised—interns must meet all state requirements for licensure, including course work and internship experiences. This requires flexibility and alternative ways of providing the experiences that they need. McClannon et al. (2018), do believe, however, "well-constructed and concentrated online environments which foster student immersion may actually enhance students' sense of presence and community" (p. 155).

Coping Mechanisms Under COVID-19

The pandemic disrupted the lives of both students and educators (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020). The need to manage fatigue that comes in many identifiable and unidentifiable forms during online teaching and internships became evident during the pandemic. In principal preparation programs, the students, who are adult learners and also full-time employees, some with young children, and others who homeschool their children,

working as teachers in their schools and completing a graduate program, were required to monitor and navigate their child's online instruction on such platforms as Zoom. Some were faced with the challenges of taking care of elderly parents in the home or taking care of sick family members, managing household chores such as laundry, cleaning and meal preparation, and the mental exhaustion of working from home under these circumstances. Others, having fallen victim to the pandemic itself, were hospitalized and resumed their studies after recovery; some have had to deal with the long-term effects of the disease.

Several strategies can help students cope with issues created by the pandemic. The first is to provide structure, routine and clear expectations (Public School Forum of North Carolina, 2020). Professors can be flexible with the due dates of assignments to give students who might be facing competing demands of their time. Professors can allow grater vulnerability so that they better connect with students (Gino & Bernstein, 2021). Students need to feel that they have a powerful adult who is compassionate and supportive (Public School Forum of North Carolina, 2020). Instructors and professors can allow venting sessions, or provide one-on-one sessions. These sessions can enhance the bond of humanity found in our common experiences and vulnerability as "it is increasingly clear that students' social and emotional experiences influence their learning" (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020, p. 457). It is equally important for professors to recognize that students and faculty may have lost loved ones and may be dealing with grief, anger, irritability, and helplessness. Professors must acknowledge the pain and show understanding about how difficult it can be to process traumatic events (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020). This underscores the need to deliberately create more time for check-ins with students and to develop relationships aimed at building resiliency.

As reported by the *Chronicle for Higher Education* (2020), for professors, the pandemic caused: stress, mental exhaustion, struggling to keep up, hopelessness, frustration anxiety, grief and burnout, decreased interest in teaching, considering retirement and leaving higher education or changing careers within, deterioration of work life balance, and decline in research productivity. While handling their own fears and challenges, professors have a responsibility to teach and motivate students, as well as to ensure students are successful in their programs. Gino and Bernstein (2021) shared strategies of helping cope with the pandemic, such as starting class by asking students to share their wins for the week or month—completed projects, birthdays, anniversaries, self-care strategies during the pandemic, etc. In her classes, Gino encouraged students to share their super power so that students can see the good that is happening around them despite the pandemic. She asked students to share their reflections about their experiences, and how they applied them to their professional and personal lives (Gino & Beinstern, 2021) thus giving the students the emotional support they need to cope with the pandemic.

Purpose of the Present Study

The purpose of this study was three pronged. The first was to learn about intern experiences of transitioning to online during COVID-19 as graduate students who were also working teachers. The second was to gauge the level of support they received from supervising principals and the principal preparation program faculty. The third was to utilize the survey results to inform the principal preparation program about the needs of interns in order to ensure their success during the pandemic.

Method

Sample

We deployed a survey to two cohorts, one in the Master in School Administration (MSA) Degree Program and the Graduate Certificate in School Leadership (GCSL) Certificate Program during their last semester. The internship is typically completed during the last three semesters of each program. This sample reflected the normal size of cohorts in our program. The survey was deployed at the beginning of summer of 2020, four months after the onset of the coronavirus pandemic caused by COVID-19. During the internship, students traditionally perform their leadership activities at a school of their choice while under the supervision of a licensed school principal. All internship activities are designed to address the state approved principal standards (NCSBE & NCDPI, 2013).

Instrument

We created a Google Forms survey that asked for (a) demographic information, (b) professional training received during the pandemic, (c) the level of emotional and wellness support, (d) involvement of different stakeholders in the school, (f) established decision making processes and communication trees, and (g) level of support for students needed from university programs. The questions were designed to inform the program about how to better serve students by ensuring a rigorous and valuable internship experience.

Design

This was a descriptive case study that used a Google Forms survey to gather qualitative data about the experiences of principal interns during the pandemic. According to Creswell (2013) our study qualifies as a single instrumental case study because "the researcher focuses on an issue or concern, and then selects one bounded case to illustrate this

issue" (p. 99) to best understand the problem or issue. The study involved a principal preparation program in a large comprehensive university located in the southeastern part of the United States. The students were the first interns in the program to complete their internship during the pandemic. Their experiences were critical in informing best practices for working with interns throughout the course of the pandemic.

Results

The survey yielded a response rate of 59.1% as 13/22 students responded. Seven students (53.8%) from the Graduate Certificate Program taught at the following school levels: six females (one in a charter and one in an alternative school, two in elementary school, two in high school), and one male (elementary school). Six students (46.2%) were from the Master in School Administration Degree with four females (two in elementary and two in middle school) and two males (one in high, one in middle school). Several themes emerged from the survey.

The Impact on Interns Transitioning Online

In response to the questions: "Describe your school's plan for transitioning to online?" and "How did your school ensure continuity of learning and teaching?", a majority indicated the process was stressful but manageable. To demonstrate how overwhelming and stressful it was for one student, they wrote, "We were already working digitally as our teachers are Apple trained. The impact is extremely traumatic as we were only given 24 hours to change teaching tactics. This has been a way of building the airplane while we fly it." Another student went as far as to post a hyperlink to an article on trauma-informed teaching as their response to the question (Learning for Justice Staff, 2020).

Some responses illustrated the technological divide in schools that arguably

influenced the quality of their internship. One student's response underscored the haste in which their school had to transition from face-to-face instruction to on-line learning.

> Initial work packets were created for [the] first two weeks, over that time we introduced Zoom to our students and began having informal sessions with them, provided laptops to those who needed them, created new packets for those without access. Teachers were to transition to having three sessions a week with students, and online assignment.

In contrast, another student described an easier transition based on the existing infrastructure. "My school is Title I, received a Verizon grant. Our students have 1:1 technology. Each student has an iPad and data provided by Verizon. We were already working digitally as our teachers are Apple trained." Other students reported a variety of training sessions that included Zoom, Adobe Connect, Edgenuity, Google classroom, Canvas and optional training on various online learning platforms offered by district technology facilitators.

Building Social and Emotional Support

Working during the pandemic brought untold stress to educators, students and staff. School districts, principals, guidance and counselors needed to put structures in place that catered to the social and emotional needs that would help the school community cope.

> [The] counselor has offered support through videos and office hours (Google Meet) times. The county has offered links to provide support with articles intending to help adults, but nothing formal. Talks are happening about the future of social-emotional support and learning since this pandemic is not just affecting achievement gaps, but mental health is suffering more and will continue to be a pressing issue moving forward for EVERYONE!

The immediate priority for most schools was to ensure that there were weekly contacts

initiated by the social worker, school counselor, and teachers. One student reported that the

principals made personal well-being calls to staff as described, "We focused on check-ins

and meeting families [*sic*] basic needs first." The general feeling was that teachers

continuously contacted parents and students and social workers made calls and checked on

families.

School Community Engagement During COVID-19

Community engagement is critical in opening and expanding dimensions of learning

for all students. The involvement of the school and community produces outcomes that are

far reaching for students. Three interns reported that their schools did not engage

stakeholders at all while three students worked with technology companies such as Verizon,

AT & T and Spectrum to provide free internet services. Schools made efforts to work with

food banks to ensure that their students and families had food on their tables. A student

noted, "Stakeholders helped to provide grocery bags for staff to deliver to needy students."

Generally, many interns reported that their communities were supportive and this helped to

mitigate challenging situations.

Decision Making Processes and Communication During COVID-19

Interns reported communication and decision making at three levels; the

superintendent, the principal and the school improvement teams. Using a variety of

platforms, superintendents shared information as noted by one intern "the district kept in

close contact so we were aware of changes and plans going forward." Keeping schools

apprised was important as COVID-19 protocols kept changing. Schools established

emergency communication trees as a contingent measure. Interns reported that principals

made weekly contacts with teachers, parents and students. In addition, school improvement

teams, department chairs, professional learning teams shared information with teachers.

Principal Mentoring and Coaching of Interns During the Pandemic

In a regular internship devoid of the pandemic, there were variabilities of the

internship experiences due to program quality features such as the supervising principal,

faculty quality, cohort structure, peer relationships and program rigor and relevance (Ni et al,

2018).

Describing the mentoring and learning during the pandemic, six students reported that

they did not receive the support they needed because of the challenges principals faced. One

student summed it up as "He's an amazing principal. I just think he's overwhelmed with

everything right now. I've reached out a few times, but I haven't heard anything back." While

other students reported that they learned critical leadership skills and were afforded many

opportunities to learn the nuances of the principalship. One student expressed "As a

principal, we will need a plan. Much like how Columbine changed the world about active

shooters, we will now need a plan for when students are to be taught digitally."

`   These uneven experiences were common among interns in preparation programs

(Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Geer 2020). What our candidates experienced is consistent

with research but the pandemic widened the gap due to lack of infrastructure and the ability

to adapt.

Levels of Support from University Preparation Programs During the Pandemic

As a principal preparation program, we wanted to maintain program rigor while

acknowledging the frustrations and anxieties of our students. As one student reported

"Classes at the university level are not a priority right now. Data is difficult to get because we

have to be on campus to access sensitive information. I am not able to proceed forward,

because I am so stuck in the right now." To alleviate the burden on our students we quickly

adjusted our schedules providing extra office hours, shared personal cellphone numbers, and

met with students in Zoom. We did not want students to bear the burden alone if they were

facing tough times in their personal and professional lives. It is clear students had frustrations

and anxieties amid a constantly changing educational landscape. One student captured this

sentiment that mirrored the views of most students.

> I don't know what my professors could do, except to be respectful of what is being
>
> placed on us in the schools right now. Our minds are stressed and I know that I am
>
> having a very difficult time concentrating. There is so much relying on us and we
>
> can't mess up.

Students grappled with real life issues that required professors to be more understanding,

flexible, patient, kind, supportive, approachable, and to connect with students on a more

personal level. One student wrote, "Some teachers are in a real bind: teacher, university

student, parent, care-taker, and patient. This [is] a very difficult time right now." To

demonstrate how professors helped cope another intern expressed "Flexibility is the main

thing that has benefitted us during this crisis. The most important part of support is to back

off and understand that we are teachers first and our students come first." As a program we

noted these concerns and worked with our interns to provide learning opportunities that still

met program outcomes but fully acknowledged the challenges exacerbated by the pandemic.

Discussion

This sample of interns who participated in the survey provided a portrait of

experiences that students in our principal preparation program experienced during the

pandemic. The pandemic clearly is unprecedented and provided challenges to everyone around the globe. For administrative interns, the challenges and pressures were unpredictable, intense and difficult. The experiences of the students in this cohort clearly demonstrated that completing the internship during the pandemic meant navigating many challenges. Interns assumed roles that they would not typically perform under normal conditions with complexities that "would challenge the most well prepared, stable, and experienced teacher workforce" (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020, p. 457). For instance, students had to deliver meals, computers, instructional packets to students to cater to physical and instructional needs. Undoubtedly, teaching students online, and also meeting the demands of the internship during the pandemic created high levels of stress and less than optimal conditions for a successful internship.

As noted from responses, seven students out of 13 reported that they did not receive any additional mentoring from their principals. This lack of mentoring does not imply that principals were negligent of their duties, but probably was a result of other priorities that demanded their time and resources. Interns were not able to meet with their professors and principals face-to-face. Pandemic anxiety and fatigue could have caused both interns and principals to focus on other priorities. For example, COVID-19 protocols as directed by the Centers for Diseases Control (CDC) kept changing for schools and the amount of time, resources and fortitude required to keep abreast with these changes may have left principals with little time to focus on their administrative interns. This work resulted in increased responsibilities for principals and teachers, and the interns themselves. For students who had supportive principals, completing the internship during the pandemic offered great learning opportunities. Some students went beyond expectations and performed high impact activities,

clocked in more hours beyond the required hours for the internship, some even felt highly

confident and prepared to lead a school.

Lessons Learnt

Flexibility

For students who did not receive support from principals, the program faculty

formulated creative ways of how students would still address internship requirements without

compromising the rigor. For example, program faculty reduced the minimum hours required

to students who were facing challenges. Flexibility with due dates became an imperative to

help students who could not meet deadlines due to the overwhelming crush of

responsibilities. Professors increased their office hours in Zoom to work and talk with

students. Connecting with students and listening to their fears and anxieties was helpful to

help students successfully complete their final semester. This was an opportunity to create

authentic relationships with students as we shared our common human experiences.

Building Authentic Relationships

In meetings with professors, students shared news of the loss of loved ones or how

they were coping with sick children or family members, and the caregiving responsibilities

they had to perform for elderly parents, spouses, and children. Sometimes the intern would

report that they were infected with the virus themselves. In such cases, the professors listened

to the interns' concerns, showed compassion and asked ways in which they could help. Some

students cried and professors listened to give space for students to vent their frustrations. We

assured students that we were going to be supportive and work around their schedules, be

available when needed and provided assurance that we would work together to ensure

student success in the program. We made phone calls with principals to get the students the

help that they needed to successfully complete the internship.

According to O'Brien-Richardson (2020) the pandemic has taught educators to teach students how to "overcome, survive, and be resilient—lifelong skills they will remember long after they forget our content and expertise" (para. 3). In most cases the professor and student were going through the same challenges, they had to overcome, survive and be resilient together. These were moments that allowed both professor and student to connect together more deeply as human beings.

Intentionality

The lives of our interns as full-time employees juggling different roles were already difficult prior to the pandemic and became even more challenging and stressful. Our role as faculty was to bring a sense of optimism and hope as suggested by Gino and Berstein (2021). Disparate internship experiences during the internship in a normal situation are expected but inequities were widened during the pandemic. Students who worked in highly resourced schools and who received support from their principals did not have many problems meeting the internship requirements. Program faculty had to adapt and support interns who were in a crisis mode to ensure success and completion of the program. The faculty listened, were patient and paid attention to the idiosyncrasies of our students. Our goal was to graduate students who were ready to assume leadership roles in a crisis and beyond. We focused on the investment of functional skills and core leadership competencies required for licensure and reduced the number of artifacts that demonstrated mastery on the seven standards required for licensure. We also reduced the number of internship hours as long as the student had performed a variety of activities that addressed the core leadership functions required for licensure.

Program Rigor

Effective principal preparation programs are characterized by strong research and practice, clear standards, integrated and coherent curriculum, a cohort model, authentic experiences, and strong district and university collaboration (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Geer, 2020). Our principal preparation program is standards-based and follows a program of study where students are given multiple opportunities to address state licensure standards throughout coursework and the internship. In each course students complete a capstone project in addition to six projects required for the internship. The program and the state require a portfolio, which is a holistic assessment. Students guided by the state pre-service rubric showcase their work and demonstrate proficiency on the state standards. These are non-negotiables about matriculation in our programs.

While the students complete the internship, there is a process of checks and balances that occurs. The supervising principal and professor provide guidance, and the superintendent or his or her designee signs the paperwork to endorse that the student was given the support they needed to complete the internship. This form of data triangulation helps to identify gaps and inconsistencies and works as a mechanism to better serve the intern. During the pandemic, we did not have a single superintendent or principal refuse to endorse a candidate as having successfully completed the internship and ready to become a school principal.

Geer (2020) argued that strong university district partnerships are critical in formulating effective internship models that are student centered and where students determine their learning in addition to streamlined inputs, processes and outcomes. The collaborative work to guide interns during a pandemic led to good outcomes that led to simultaneously accomplishing mutual goals for the university program and school districts.

Our job as professors was to ensure a strong alignment between the state licensure standards and the quality of internship activities performed by the students during the pandemic. As noted earlier, we acknowledge that some principals did not provide students with the highest level of support they would ordinarily, due to challenges posed by the pandemic, but students performed activities that are significant for future principals. They learned valuable skills about how to lead and not lead a school during a time of rapid and unsettling change.

Professors also worked on connecting better with students and offered extra support to ensure the course work, capstone assignments and internships were completed. We did not compromise the rigor of our program but made adjustments where necessary. According to Deschaine and Jankens (2016), "School administrator programs have an obligation to allow participants [interns] to fully experience the breadth and depth of issues and environments that they will encounter once they become principals" (p .7). We have no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic created opportunities for significant learning experiences that exposed students to real challenges and substantial complexities of the job. Interns learned coping and adaptive skills required to lead schools during crises and ever-changing educational environments. As educators we wanted our students to learn "how to overcome, survive and be resilient—skills they will remember long after they forget our content and expertise" (O'Brien-Richardson, 2020, para. 8). Unfortunately, during this period in history—a time characterized by technological innovation, unsettling political, cultural, and global forces, this will probably not be the last time that public school leaders will have to grapple with challenges of such epic proportions.

Lessons for School Administration Programs and Academics

What has been gleaned from this study may be applicable to not only school preparation

programs and their interns, but to other disciplines. Building authentic relationships, leading with intentionality and purpose, as well as maintaining rigor, are essential aspects of leadership that should be evident in any organization. Leaders in all professions should be cognizant of the political, social, and communal factors that impact the lives of those that they lead. While heightened during an international pandemic, the well-being of the members of any organization, whether it be public or private, will impact the success of the organization. It would be wise for leaders to build strong caring relationships with their members based on genuine concern, so that when either the daily squall or epic storm arrives, a firm foundation has been built so that all can weather the tempest.

In this study, we acknowledge that the sample size was small and we used survey data that may not provide the intended breath and scope of the research. Other researchers may conduct research that investigates the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on their programs and interns using larger sample sizes and methodologies that offer greater scope and robust statistical power. The cumulative effect of such research will enable meta-analyses of the phenomenon and comparative analysis within and across different disciplines. Additionally, the pandemic offered an opportunity for academic programs to revisit curricula and its delivery modes. For example, crises management should be a topic or one of the courses, to be included in any academic program. Academics may need to perform scenario planning for their programs given the impact of the pandemic and the shifting landscape of education. The delivery of instruction using online learning may be the future and therefore the quality of instruction needs to be enhanced to meet the needs of students.

Positionality of the Researchers

All research is influenced by the researcher's positionality—the adoption of a world

view and position to guide researchers to complete research tasks (Darwin Holmes, 2020).

Furthermore, Darwin Holmes argues that positionality is shaped by the social, historical and

political context of the researcher. We acknowledge that our worldviews and social,

historical and political context influenced our research process and see it as an imperative to

disclose and acknowledge who we are in this study. We are professors who have been in the

program for an average of 15 years each, comprising one White male and two females, one

Black and one White. Prior to joining academia, the male professor was a school district

superintendent while the female White professor was once a school principal and the Black

professor, an assistant principal in another country. The female researchers have national and

international experiences working in schools. This combination of understanding school

leadership from different perspectives brings, in our view, a rich learning experience for our

students.

In our current roles, the female White professor is a former director of the school

leadership program while the Black female professor now serves as the current director of the

program. The male professor works with all in-coming cohorts as he is in-charge of our

orientation programs. He has also served as student advisor for our programs for many years.

Besides teaching, we all supervise administrative interns. We conducted the research in 2020,

four months after the COVID-19 pandemic had started and we have an insider perspective

and intimate familiarity with our programs. We also have prior knowledge, close proximity

and attachment to our research participants—our students. This may raise potential bias in

our understanding, interpretation of findings and conclusions of this study. We tried to offer

honest and truthful accounts of our experiences but these are subject to interrogation by

outsiders as our interpretations might be viewed as myopic and lacking some objectivity. We

also might have failed to realize that as researchers of our own students and programs, what might have been assumed obvious might not have the same meaning to all (Darwin Holmes, 2020). We recognize that our individual positionality might have influenced the research process, discussion of our results and conclusion of the study, but as researchers our role was to uphold the ethics of research and to maintain neutrality.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

The limitation of this study is that it employed a qualitative method with interns in one principal preparation program at one university in the southeastern part of the United States. The responses of interns are self-reported and they were submitted to faculty in the program. There is a strong possibility of skewed responses and bias in reporting these results from students. We are professors in the program and closely connected with the students and maybe our own biases could have inadvertently contaminated how we interpreted and reported data. Therefore, generalizability of this study may not be applicable to some subjects as replicating the same study to different populations with different contexts may yield different results. The sample size was small and conducting a mixed method study design with larger samples may give significant results that are more generalizable. A follow-up study on interns who participated in this study would potentially provide critical data that may reveal how our graduates are adapting to the new realities and challenges. School principals are drivers for school improvement, therefore, longitudinal studies that investigate the long-term effects of the Coronavirus pandemic on the principalship are recommended to bring plausible answers to speculations that abound about the future of education after the pandemic.

Conclusion

The pandemic disrupted lives, but our duty was to adapt and maintain the integrity of the program and perform our core functions as educators to benefit our students. The interns who participated in the survey for this study were in the last two semesters of a principal preparation program. The responses gave a portrait of the experiences of interns during the pandemic. Some students received less than optimal support from their supervising principals as the principals themselves were equally overwhelmed because of the quick turnaround they had to make for their schools to transition to online teaching. Working from home while attending to a myriad of responsibilities and teaching simultaneously caused burnout, fatigue, frustration, hopelessness, and anger. As program faculty, we worked with our students by providing some flexibility in due dates for assignments and giving extensions to students who needed more time to complete their portfolio. We reduced the number of internship hours for students who needed help, but most of our interns still managed and went beyond the required 300 hours. We also invested in building authentic relationships and created more time to personally connect with our students by adding additional office hours so that students would have safe spaces to be able to vent. Ultimately, students came to understand that professors cared for them in both their personal and professional lives. We had to be intentional, focusing on the fundamentals—creating a work-life balance and giving support and guidance that led to successful internship completion. Working with the interns provided an opportunity to build deeper connections as the weight of the stress of the pandemic made us vulnerable and yet resilient and accomplished our goals. We built a better process to continue working during the pandemic and to prepare for other crisis situations as a principal preparation program. We hope this research will inform other programs and lead to impact

studies on the subject of how educational programs can adapt successfully to crises.

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