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Subject: Preparation of future school leaders

**A Study of the Acquisition of Leadership Competencies among
Educational Administration Students**

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Abstract

Institutions with principalship preparation programs all intend to produce qualified individuals who cannot only pass the state certification exam, but who can also provide quality leadership for the schools based on the State competencies (standards) set for principals. This study seeks to look at how educational administration students acquire a firm understanding of the principalship competencies that the students are to master to pass their TExES principal's exam and by which they are to lead the schools. Too often good students from this region do well in class but do not do as well on the exam. Even though most eventually pass their exam, this raises concerns as to whether the competencies have been internalized so that they can be properly utilized once they become school leaders. This study seeks to identify key components of instruction that assist students to internalize the competencies as reported by the students and as revealed by analysis of data. It seeks to make recommendations based on this analysis for the benefit of improving the preparation and performance of our future school leaders. Doing so will assist this university and others to better prepare graduates like ours to meet the changing social, economic, and educational challenges unique to the borderlands. School leaders that are better prepared and that have more confidence in the foundations of their education stand to provide a greater benefit for our public school students along the border and in South Texas.

Introduction

One of the biggest challenges for any graduate school of educational administration is that of having students born and raised in the area become the most competent future school leaders that we can produce. Of particular interest for this study is the search for those instructional elements or activities in the preparation program that give students the confidence and certainty that they know and can use the state's principal competencies in a competent and useful manner to resolve problems they may encounter as school administrators. Finding the answers to this query is becoming a "holy grail" for many universities that have students like ours and that search for future school leaders among such students.

Background

Students at this university in South Texas enter the principalship preparation program through a virtually open-door policy. To be admitted, students need a bachelor's degree from an accredited institution, a teaching certificate, and to have taken the Graduate Record Exam (GRE). Students without the GRE may take up to six credit hours of the principalship program courses under conditional admission. Upon meeting the GRE requirement, students may proceed in the program provided that they maintain a GPA of 3.0 in the principalship program courses (Texas A & M International University Catalog, 2006).

Upon successful completion of a 36 credit hours course of studies, students earn their Master of Science with a major in Educational Administration and proceed to work on their certification coursework which consists of nine credit hours. During the certification program, students are eligible to attempt the State's principal certification exam, called the Texas Examination of Educator Standards (TExES), at the end of a review class for this exam. Students may retake the principal's TExES exam until they pass it.

The principal's TExES exam is comprised of three domain areas: Domain I - School Community Leadership; Domain II - Instructional Leadership; and Domain III - Administrative Leadership. Domain I consists of three competencies that relate to the principal as a school community leader. Domain II consists of four competencies that relate to the principal as an instructional leader. And Domain III consists of two competencies that relate to the principal as an administrative leader (SBEC, 2006). While the cumulative passing rate can reach 90% or better, a number of students have to retake the principal's exam more than twice to pass it. Students at this university have more difficulty with Domain II than with the other domains.

Coursework typically consists of presentation and discussion of material for the understanding of the subject area, review of related literature, research reports, guest speakers, and discussion of the relevant competencies that comprise the standards from which the principal's TExES exam is built. Discussion of the competencies can vary from presenting and discussing sample problems from the State Board of

Educator Certification (SBEC) website or problems created by the instructor or the students mimicking those types of problems, and/or having students identify the competency at work when dealing with a given educational issue or activity at the moment. Discussion of the competencies may or may not be a regular item at each class meeting.

To meet the challenge of improving student performance on the principal's TExES exam, a number of different approaches have been used at various universities. One approach is to raise entrance requirements for students. That is not an option here due to the open-door policy. Another approach is the identification of a screening instrument to predict success on the principal's exam. A review of such attempts reveal mixed results. Texas Woman's University (TWU), however, has achieved promising results by utilizing the verbal portion of the Nelson-Denny Adult Reading Test to predict success on the principal's exam with a 77.6% accuracy (Irons, Thomas, & Kinnison, 2006; Keedy & Grandy, 1999; Lindle & Rinehart, 1998). Still another approach is to align course content with the state standards to ensure that the students acquire the given competencies. This approach requires that instruction be aligned with skills required in each competency. To attain its success, TWU has supplemented this latter approach with the remediation of identified weak areas prior to allowing its students to attempt the principal's exam. Their assistance interventions include reviews and workshops on test-taking strategies (Irons, Thomas, & Kinnison, 2006).

Like TWU, Angelo State University (ASU) also aligned its course content with the state standards. In addition, ASU utilizes a matrix by which its students in the program critically analyze instructional resources and align them to a particular competency. This instrument was developed to promote in students the development of valuable knowledge and experience in critical thinking and decision-making skills. Their method has students addressing the major points in the example (Fact), an evaluation of the facts as understood by the student (Interpretation), and a denoting of applications of the information under review based on the knowledge and experiences of the student (Application). They reported a 90% success rate on the principal's exam due to their methods (Lowe & Hademenos, 2003).

Lamar University (LU) reported using a benchmark test encompassing all nine competencies of the TExES exam for principals for the purpose of identifying competencies in which students needed additional help. The LU recommendation was that professors use the results of benchmark tests to determine the competencies in which their students need additional assistance (Evans, Nguyen, and Buck, 2006).

Dr. E. Wilmore (2003) teaches a review workshop for the purpose of preparing for the principal's TExES exam. Her fundamental operating belief is for students to apply their knowledge and skills to the test, as well as to life in general. The researcher has taken this to mean that the competencies should be learned both as a class activity and in the field.

The model of treatment used in this study to assist students in learning their competencies for the TExES employed elements of those used at other institutions. Students were asked to identify a competency and one of the supporting phrases

(bullet) found within the explanation of the competency for observations or assertions made in reflections and other assignments done for the class in which they received the treatment. The instructor gave students feedback on the accuracy of their competency identification. Class discussions took place on clarifying identification and application of the competencies to issues at hand. In addition students were asked towards the end of the semester a number of questions checking to see what activities in classes helped them internalize and apply the competencies.

Research Problem

What activities related to the principal preparation program help students internalize the principal competencies?

1. What class activities do students identify as helping them internalize and apply the principal competencies?
2. What field activities do students identify as helping them internalize and apply the principal competencies?
3. What do students say helped them the most in learning and applying the principal competencies?
4. What do principals say about the competency-based leadership of our students?
5. What does data collected on internalization of the competencies reveal?

Methodology

A survey instrument was developed and used to collect the information from the students concerning their perceptions on what helped them the most to internalize and apply the principal competencies. In addition, students in summer classes were approached to participate in a pre- and post-test of the competencies for domain II. The test was composed of items drawn from sample tests. Students in the classes with the researcher were given the treatment of having to post a competency and a bullet for the assertions or observations they made in reflections or assignments related to the educational issues at hand. Students in other classes were used as the control group. Other professors who were also instructing these students were asked how they taught the competencies to the students.

Data Results

The polling of the students through a survey revealed the following variety of answers. The tabulations represent the different answers given by thirty students participating in the survey.

Class activities that helped internalize the competencies

- Reflections with competencies
- Chapter presentations with competencies

- Group/individual presentations with competencies
- Constant talk about competencies
- Practicing simulation test questions of State exam
- Doing activities in which we have to tie things to a competency
- Class discussions on competencies and scenarios
- Having to add the competencies to class assignments
- Collaborative team work that included competencies
- Research paper with competencies along with references
- Group discussions when studying with classmates
- AEIS report analysis with connection to competencies
- Summarization of articles with competencies
- Reflections of what guest speakers had to say (with competencies)
- Class discussions about what to do in different situations
- Leadership class discussions

Field activities that helped internalize the competencies

- Interviews in which my questions are tied to competencies
- Analyzing content of interviews for applicable competencies
- Analyzing policies and procedures with competencies in mind
- AEIS report analysis done with help of school administrator
- Discussing issues of curriculum & instruction, daily operations, & responsibilities with school administrator
- Shadowing a school administrator for a day and reflecting with competencies
- Doing research at school campus
- Writing reflections with competencies about field activities
- Being able to “do” some of the things an administrator does helped make a connection with competencies
- Any field activity that involved a competency or a bullet from that competency made the competency real
- School-site mentor asked me to state what competency was applicable to what I was doing for each field activity under his supervision
- Using the competencies to design the questions I used for interviewing

Things that helped the most to internalize the competencies

- Having to have written competencies for my assignments
- Practice test items helped
- Understanding key phrases and words learned from the competencies and bullets
- Having to apply the competencies in most of my work
- The longer we use the competencies, the better I feel about them
- Both class activities and field activities that had competencies
- Practice, practice, practice
- Group discussions with my classmates
- Having to review the competencies on a daily basis
- Class discussions of sample test items
- Looking for positive statements over negative choices
- Looking at question-answer connections
- Looking at field-activities as field-studies and analyzing what competency was correlated to each activity
- Class discussion of videos presented

Pre- and Post-test Data

Pre-and post-test information was collected from the treatment group but was not as fully collected from the control group. Hence this data is not reported here at this time for purposes of comparison.

Principals' perception of competency-based students

Principals were not available during the better part of the summer and this portion of the study will be conducted at a later time.

Conclusions

A review of the lists generated from the survey reveals that all questions asked of them were answered in virtually the same way. The students gave responses indicative of a perception of acquisition by using the competencies and their bullets to help them connect the competencies with the educational issue at hand. They valued having to learn to apply the competencies in class and field activities, to use the competencies to generate questions for field interviews, having to do the treatment exercise at every class meeting, and having discussions in class to reaffirm the identification of the competencies for different activities. They valued using the competencies to generate questions for which they sought answers.

Most students in the treatment group were pre- and post-tested on the competencies for Domain II. The control group was lost due to change of semesters and change of student enrollment during the summer sessions. This was to be a cross-check on the factual success of the treatment utilized. This will be performed shortly.

Summary

The students were highly cooperative both as participants in the survey and in using the treatment that was asked of them to do. These students appreciated the fact that they were doing certain activities now to help them internalize the competencies in preparation for the principal's TExES exam at the end of the program. Based on their positive response, a recommendation is made that the treatment be continued and that the pre-and post-test collection of data be conducted so that it can be analyzed for the degree of effectiveness of the method used.

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