



IMPROVING MENTORING OF ALTERNATIVELY CERTIFIED SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS IN KENTUCKY

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Abstract

To help combat shortages of school administrators, Kentucky has established an alternative certification program that provides participants immediate certification to begin working as a school administrator. During the program, participants complete coursework and receive support from district and university mentors. Most other states have similar programs. The improvement of support from district and university mentors was the focus of this study. A literature review supported the importance of mentoring and suggested qualities of effective mentors and effective mentoring activities. This study used mixed methods in a convergent parallel design. Participants completed surveys consisting of short answer questions, rating scales, ranking questions, and checkbox questions at three points (early, middle, and late) during a yearlong mentoring cycle. The results of this study suggest that mentors should take careful inventory of the characteristics of their mentees. Likely results of those inventories are detailed by the study and include suggestions such as mentees need immediate training in school law and finance. The results also indicate numerous services that mentors should likely provide to mentees such as simply checking in on them periodically, providing professional development ideas, assisting with licensure exam preparation, ensuring that mentees do not neglect tasks proven effective by research, and encouraging mentees to engage in regular leisure activities. Unique to the role of university mentors, mentees sometimes want advice in dealing with disagreements with district leaders.

Keywords: School Administrators, School Administrator Alternative Certification, Mentoring Educational Leaders.

I. Introduction

An article commissioned by the Wallace Foundation has combined concerns from the National Association of Secondary School Principals and the National Association of Elementary School Principals to sound alarm bells regarding a looming principal shortage. The same article underscores this concern by pointing to recent research reiterating the importance that principals have on student achievement as well as on teacher satisfaction and retention (Ruggierell, 2022). Nearly twenty years before the Wallace Foundation article, 23 states already had some type of provision in place for the alternative certification of administrators to combat shortages. Another six states were considering such provisions (Anthes, 2004). At the time of the Anthes article, Kentucky was one of the states with provisions in place and they remain in place in a similar form to the current day as a university-based alternative certification program, known more commonly as “Option Six”. This option can refer to an alternative option for a variety of education certifications, but this study focused only on school principal certification. Educators working under this option receive temporary provisional certification to begin working as a principal, assistant principal, or school dean upon admission to an Option Six program.

Description and Prevalence of Principal Alternative Certification in Kentucky

According to the University-Based Alternative Certification Program Kentucky Administrative Regulation (2023), applicants to a school administration Option Six program must meet the admission standards for traditional programs. Additionally, Option Six programs are required to assess a candidate’s educational background and provide them with mentoring and coursework that allows full-time employment as a school administrator and a completion time of two years or less. The mentoring consists of a minimum of five hours of time spent by university faculty, five hours of time spent by a district-level mentor,

and an additional five hours by either mentor. The details regarding this mentoring and other support are part of a written agreement between the university and the employing school district. In addition, there is to be regular communication between these two entities to address identified areas of improvement. It is the improvement of this mentoring that was the focus of this study.

The number of universities and school administrators recently involved with Option Six principal certification in Kentucky is far from trivial. According to the Education Professional Standards Board (2024), there were ten universities in Kentucky currently operating Option Six school principal programs. Also, between the years of 2019 and 2023, there were 114 candidates in these programs (T. Davis, personal communication, March 22, 2024).

II. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Searby (2014) conducted a phenomenological study to describe the mindset of a mentee, commonly known as a “protégé” in the literature, who is prepared to receive maximum benefit from a mentoring relationship. The existence of such a mindset serves as a conceptual framework for this study as it seeks to tap into the mindset to develop a description of optimal mentoring activities for school administrators in alternative certification programs. This framework is called the Protégé Mentoring Mindset Framework. This lesser-known framework can be supported by the more widely known Theory of Andragogy, or adult learning, which posits that there are unique characteristics of adult learners (Cox, 2015). This study seeks to use the existence of those characteristics among school administrators in alternative certification programs to determine optimal mentoring activities.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study included:

What do protégés bring (and not bring) into the job?

What mentoring and other activities do protégés see as helpful to them?

What do covert indicators tell us about how mentors can help protégés?

What dispositions do protégés have that the mentor may want to influence?

“Covert indicators” were those that did not address mentoring directly but that were still thought to provide relevant information (e.g., What do you believe are your main areas of needed growth as a school administrator?).

Scope and Limitations

Due to the obvious differences between the work of a teacher and that of a school administrator, it is anticipated that very few of the conclusions from this study apply to the mentoring of teachers working under Option 6. However, district-level administrators including instructional supervisors, directors of pupil personnel, and superintendents can work under Option 6. It is anticipated that some of the conclusions from this study may apply to these positions.

III. Literature Review

The Need for Mentoring

Bauer and Silver (2018) conducted a study of more than 200 first-year principals and found that feelings of isolation in the job can lead to burnout and decreased self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and persistence. This clearly points to the need for mentoring. Sutcher et al. (2017) studied the key features of effective programs supporting principals’ learning, including those for new principals. They found that these programs are helpful for principals from all levels of experience and that behaviors modeled by mentors later become part of a mentee’s routine. In an article examining international approaches to school leadership preparation and induction, Bush (2018) found that, in addition to professional training, school principals need a period of organizational socialization during which they learn to lead in a specific school. It was asserted that this period of socialization should include an extended process of mentoring. Focusing specifically on the alternative preparation and

licensure of principals, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (2024) recommends an internship guided by an accomplished principal, which mentoring can provide.

Qualities of Effective Mentors

The study by Sutter et al. (2017) also found that mentors should be selected because they are exemplary administrators, have an interest in mentoring, and serve schools with demographics similar to those of the mentee. Additionally, they found that mentors should be trained to be successful in their mentoring role. In a phenomenological study of veteran principals who mentored newly appointed principals for a year, Searby (2014) found that mentors who took initiative, possessed a learning orientation, had a goal orientation, and who were relational and reflective were most effective. Supporting the idea of the existence of specific qualities of effective mentors and the need for training, an evaluation commissioned by the Wallace Foundation of the Principal Pipeline Initiative, a principal preparation improvement program, Turnbull (2016) found that school district leaders recognized that mentoring novice principals required specialized skills and that training can hone those skills.

Effective Mentoring Activities

The Wallace Foundation evaluation also found that many of the mentors studied in the evaluation saw their role as simply helping principals address the day-to-day problems that arose. Also, many of the mentoring systems in the evaluation consisted of multi-year mentoring and customized professional development (Turnbull, 2016). Another perspective from the Wallace Foundation (2007) focusing specifically on principal mentoring asserted that the establishment of clear mentoring goals is essential. The recommendations from the National Association of Secondary School Principals (2024) included that alternatively licensed principals be provided with quarterly performance appraisals. Mentors could provide these appraisals; although, not as a replacement for official employee evaluation. Tingle et al. (2019) found in a study of district leadership development programs that newer principals placed great importance on supervisor support and building relationships with peers. The work of the Wallace Foundation (2007) also reached conclusions applicable to agencies responsible for providing principal mentoring. These include stipends that are commensurate with the time required and importance of the task as well as gathering meaningful information about the efficacy of mentoring systems.

Commentary on the Literature Review

All but one of the studies cited in this literature review pertained to the general topic of mentoring of new principals and not the more specific topic of mentoring new principals who are currently working under an alternative certification. The reason for this is simply that essentially no research or writing could be located regarding the more specific topic. Even literature regarding the more general topic was scarce. This supports the importance of the subject of this study. It should be noted that there was a greater literature base relative to the areas of mentoring new teachers and the supervision of principals, but these were regarded as almost completely different concepts. Key points from this literature review support and supplement the findings of this study.

IV. Methodology

This study used mixed methods in a convergent parallel design. Participants completed surveys consisting of short answer questions, rating scales, ranking questions, and checkbox questions at three points (early, middle, and late) during a yearlong Option Six mentoring cycle. Questions that elicited information that would not change over the course of the study (e.g., What certifications do you currently hold?) were asked only once and spread over the three sampling points to prevent one survey from being too long. Questions that elicited information that might change over the course of the study (e.g., Describe what you believe would be helpful mentoring activities from your district mentor.) were asked longitudinally, at all three points in time.

Survey Questions

Survey questions by Research Question were as follows. It is noted in parentheses whether questions were asked once during the study (early, middle, or late) or longitudinally. What do protégés bring (and not bring) into the job?

Select from a provided list the principal certification courses already completed. (early study)

Describe your leadership experience. (early study)

What positions have you held in the education field and how long did you hold each? (middle study)

What certifications do you currently hold? (middle study)

What degrees do you currently hold? (middle study)

What do you believe are your main strengths as a school administrator? (longitudinal)

What do you believe are your main areas of needed growth as a school administrator? (longitudinal)

What mentoring and other activities do protégés see as helpful to them?

Describe what you believe would be helpful mentoring activities from district mentor. (longitudinal)

Describe what you believe would be helpful mentoring activities from your university mentor. (longitudinal)

Describe any mentoring activities that you believe should be avoided. (longitudinal)

Aside from coursework and mentoring, what else could be done to support you? (longitudinal)

What do covert indicators tell us about how mentors can help protégés?

Rank (first, second, and third) from a provided list the principal certification courses that you believe are most important to you as an Option 6 administrator. (longitudinal)

Why have you decided to become a school administrator? (longitudinal)

On a scale of 1 to 10 with one being low satisfaction and 10 being high satisfaction, how would you rate your current job satisfaction? (longitudinal)

What do you do in your free time? (longitudinal)

About how many hours each week are you able to devote to free time activities? (longitudinal)

What are your future professional aspirations? (longitudinal)

What dispositions do protégés have that the mentor may want to influence?

What is the most important task within the role of principal? (longitudinal)

On a scale of 1 to 10 with one being least effective and 10 being most effective, how would you rate your current job performance? (longitudinal)

On a scale of 1 to 10 with one being low importance and 10 being high importance, how important is the principal to the success of the school? (longitudinal)

On a scale of 1 to 10 with one being low importance and 10 being high importance, how important is the district office to the success of the principal? (longitudinal)

Data Analysis

The survey question asking participants to quantify the amount of time that they spend on free time activities per week and the questions asking participants to rank current job satisfaction, current job performance, importance of the principal to the school, and importance of the district office to the success of the principal were all quantitative and longitudinal. A Repeated Measures ANOVA was used with each of these questions to test for changes in the mean responses between the early, middle, and late points of the study. No significant differences were found at the $p < .05$ level. Consequently, these questions were analyzed descriptively by reporting the overall mean of each.

The survey questions asking participants to describe what they bring into the position in terms of principal certification courses already completed, certifications held, and degrees held were analyzed using a content analysis approach. The survey question asking participants to rank (first, second, and third) from a provided list the principal certification

courses that they believed would be the most important to them as an Option Six administrator was analyzed by assigning a weight of one to third choices, two to second choices, and three to first choices. The weightings earned by each course were then summed and the top three courses were reported from the early, middle, and late study surveys. The remaining survey questions were qualitative in nature and were examined using thematic analysis. Most of these questions were longitudinal in nature, so it was noted whether themes changed or remained constant over the course of the study.

Sample

The participants consisted of five females and one male, all White, and ranging in age from 35 to 46 with a mean age of 40. One participant was a head principal and one was an assistant principal. One participant was an administrative dean and one was a dean of students both describing their duties as ranging from instructional leadership to management. Two participants were deans of students both describing their duties as mostly instructional leadership.

Results and Analysis

What Protégés Bring into the Job

Some school administrators entering an Option Six program have already been taking courses while others begin after being admitted to the program. Among the participants in this study, three had completed fundamentals of administration course, two had completed school law, and two had completed a curriculum course. Courses that only one student had completed included a course in evaluation and school culture and a diversity course. Three of the participants had completed no coursework whatsoever.

All except one participant listed numerous basic leadership positions that they had held. These included being a leader of school teams, professional learning communities, committees, and projects. These also included the elected position of serving on a school-based decision-making council, representing their school at the district level, and serving in fulltime leadership roles such as cognitive coach, school counselor, and director of special education. In addition to their teaching experience, one participant had served as a student interventionist.

In addition to their teaching credentials, the participants had a handful of additional certifications including teacher leader, program consultant, director of special education, and school counseling. One participant had National Board Certification. Also, two participants had bachelor's degrees in psychology. The participants' number of years of experience in the field of education ranged from 9 to 19 with a mean of 13.

When asked about what they believed to be their main strengths as a school administrator, participants shared a very wide range of answers that remained rather stable between rounds of data collection. The predominant themes that emerged were communication and culture and especially building relationships and organizational skills. When asked about what they believed to be their main areas of needed growth, participants shared a wide range of answers that remained very stable between rounds of data collection. The predominant themes that emerged were school law and school finance.

What Protégés See as Mentoring and Other Activities Helpful to Them

Participants had many beliefs on how they could benefit from their district mentor. These beliefs changed a bit between the three rounds of the study and really had only one recurring theme. They simply wanted someone to check in on them from time to time. Participants also had many beliefs on how they could benefit from their university mentor. These beliefs also changed a bit between the three rounds of the study, but had several recurring themes. As with the district mentor, they wanted someone to check in on them from time to time. They also wanted the university mentor to be a resource available to them especially in advising them how to deal with disagreements with district leaders. This, of course, should be approached with caution. The most predominant theme was that participant wanted assistance in preparing for the School Leaders Licensure Assessment

(SLLA) on which a passing score is required to obtain certification. When asked about mentoring actions that should be avoided, participants had very few thoughts but did mention that mentors should maintain confidentiality.

Participants also had many beliefs regarding what could be helpful to them in addition to mentoring. These beliefs fluctuated a great deal between the three rounds of the study, but suggestions for professional development opportunities and helpful books to read were somewhat consistent themes. Again, the most predominant theme was assistance in preparing for the SLLA.

What Covert Indicators Tell Us about How Mentors Can Help Protégés

Participants were provided with a list of ten common principal certification courses and asked to rank them in order of importance (first, second, and third). In the early part of the study, seven of the ten courses received at least one ranking. When the weighting system described previously was applied, school law emerged as the most important course, followed by a course that combines employee evaluation and school culture. An introduction to administration course and a curriculum course tied for the third spot. When participants were asked to complete this ranking again at the mid-point of the survey, their beliefs regarding the courses had greatly diversified with all of the courses receiving at least one ranking. The course viewed as most important changed to a tie between an introduction to school administration and curriculum. The course viewed as second most important shifted to a tie between an internship course, a cognitive coaching course, and a reflective practice course. School law dropped to third place in a tie with a course addressing organizational frameworks and human resources. When participants were asked to complete the ranking a final time at the end of the study, their beliefs remained diversified and in flux with school law moving back to the top spot. In a tie for the number two ranking were the course combining employee evaluation and school culture, the introduction to school administration course, and an internship course. In the third spot was the cognitive coaching course.

When asked why they had decided to become a school administrator, participants had a variety of responses. The responses remained very stable across the course of the study. None of the reasons were nefarious (e.g., a desire to have more power).

Participants were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 10 their beliefs on several topics. These ratings were repeated during each data collection round. As a reminder, it was noted in this study's methodology section that there were no statistically significant changes to the ratings between rounds. The rating under this research questions, pertained to current job satisfaction with the higher ratings equating to higher satisfaction. The ratings ranged from 5 to 10 with an overall mean of 8.1. This is important as Jalagat (2016) found that higher job satisfaction often leads to higher performance.

According to Takiguchi et al. (2023), leisure activities are likely to work as a buffer against stressful experiences, which are common experiences of school administrators. As a result, participants were asked at each data collection point in the study what they do in their free time and about how many hours per week they spend in these activities as a covert indicator of something that mentors might need to address. The participants reported participating in a reasonable variety of leisure activities including reading, sports, outdoor activities, and spending time with family. One participant did regard doing "work on school work" as a leisure activity, which is concerning. The overall mean of hours per week spent on leisure activities was 14.1 hours, which seems reasonable.

Participants were asked about their future professional aspirations. They shared positional aspirations such as rising to head principal if they were not already and moving to the district office; however, some were happy where they were. They also shared personal growth goals such as becoming a better leader. Interestingly, those who aspired to district leadership early in the study had decided to remain at the school level by the end of the study.

Protégé Dispositions That Mentors May Want to Influence

When asked what they believed were the most important tasks within the role of being a school principal, participants had a variety of ideas that remained rather stable between the three rounds of the study. The most recurring responses included school culture, communication, monitoring subordinate leaders (e.g., assistant principals), and putting kids first. These beliefs, while admirable, are not well-aligned with current research. According to Grissom et al. (2021), a synthesis of research found that the most important tasks for effective principals include cognitive coaching, evaluation, use of data, classroom walkthroughs, building a productive culture, promoting collaboration, and managing resources well.

Participants were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 10 their current job performance with 10 representing the highest rating. The ratings ranged from 5 to 10 with an overall mean of 7.4. Participants were also asked to rate how important they believe the principal is to the success of the school with 10 corresponding to the highest importance. The ratings ranged from 8 to 10 with an overall mean of 9.6. This high mean is a positive indicator in light of the recent research reiterating the importance that principals have on student achievement as well as on teacher satisfaction and retention (Ruggierell, 2022). The final rating asked participants how important they believed the district office to be to the success of the principal with 10 corresponding to the highest importance. The ratings ranged from 8 to 10 with an overall mean of 8.6. This indicator is also positive according to the work of Honig (2010) who asserted that improving teaching and learning requires the participation of both district offices and school leadership.

Implications

The data from this study suggests that mentors should take careful inventory of the certifications, leadership experience, self-reported strengths and areas of needed growth, and school administration courses already completed relative to their protégés. The results of this inventory will likely point toward good basic leadership skills with a desire to quickly learn more about technical aspects of their work such as school law and finance; otherwise, they will vary and reveal strengths to capitalize on and areas of needed growth to mitigate. It may be helpful for mentors to ensure that protégés take school law and finance courses sooner rather than later; however, additional changes to protégés' course schedules are not likely warranted as the courses that they perceive as most important seem to remain in flux.

Protégés are likely to desire that their district and university mentors simply check in on them from time to time, maintain confidentiality, provide professional development opportunities, suggest helpful books to read, and provide plentiful assistance in preparing for the SLLA. Unique to the role of university mentor, protégés want them to be available to advise them in dealing with disagreements with district leaders; although, great care should be taken to provide sound advice and not usurp the authority of district leaders. Mentors need to ensure that protégés do not neglect tasks proven effective by research including cognitive coaching, evaluation, use of data, classroom walkthroughs, promoting collaboration, and managing resources well. In addition, it is important for mentors to encourage protégés to engage in regular leisure activities.

Future Research

The conceptual framework for this study is not specific to administrative positions or to Option Six scenarios. As a result, this study could be replicated with Option 6 candidates working under other types of certifications. Further replication could examine mentoring programs for educators working in their first year or two under traditional certifications. As with many studies, it would be interesting to reconnect with the participants several years into their new positions to discover if a larger degree of experience impacted their thoughts on their mentoring. Lastly, this study could be repeated with a larger sample of more varied demographics.

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