Examining a University-Multiple District Sponsored Academy from the Perspective of Principal Supervisors

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Abstract

Many universities partner with school districts in providing professional development for school leaders through a principal's academy. Since 2002, Brigham Young University and five local districts, representing approximately one-third of all of the students in the state of Utah, have sponsored the BYU Principals Academy to meet the professional development needs throughout the five-district area.

While previous research has focused on understanding the experiences and perceptions of academy participants, this qualitative study explored the views of participants' district supervisors, collected during a focus group experience. Participants were asked how the academy had impacted the district, how it could better meet districts' needs, how the university and districts could more effectively partner, and how its effectiveness could be accurately evaluated. Findings indicated the need for more intentional partnering between the university and districts: with recommendations to sharpen and clarify the program focus, co-create desired learning outcomes, and strengthen university-district communication.

The field of educational leadership has long acknowledged a need for more targeted high-quality professional development for acting school principals.

Over 15 years ago the executive director of the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) declared:

> The development of principals cannot continue to be the neglected stepchild of state and district professional development efforts. It must be standards-focused, sustained, intellectually rigorous, and embedded in the principal's workday. Nothing less will lead to high levels of learning and performance by all students and teachers (Sparks, 2002, p. 81).

Research conducted over the past decade by the Wallace Foundation (2011) has shown that principal leadership can and does influence student achievement. Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, and Anderson (2010) describe the connection between principal leadership and student learning in the following way, "Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school" (p. 9).

Other researchers suggest that nearly one fourth of all school-related effects could be accounted for by the leader's direct or indirect influence (Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005). The way in which a principal coordinates the interaction of these in-school factors can result in positive effects on student achievement (Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008). The Wallace Foundation (2011) reports that when school variables are considered separately, they generally have an insignificant effect on learning.

However, "The real payoff comes when individual variables combine to reach a critical mass. Creating conditions under which that can occur is the job of the principal" (p. 2). Leithwood and colleagues (2004) found that "there are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around without intervention by a powerful leader. Many other factors may contribute to such turnarounds, but leadership is the catalyst" (p. 5).

If principal leadership can and does make a difference in student achievement and principal leadership is catalyst for change in schools, then is critical to ensure that principals remain current in their practice. Bizzell (2011) makes this same case by suggesting, "if we accept that principals' leadership is second only to classroom instruction as a school factor impacting student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2010), there is value in knowing how those leadership behaviors can be developed" (p. 42).

Specific Needs for Principal Professional Development

Improving principal leadership skills must be an ongoing process in order to meet the needs of our increasingly complex schools. Barth (1993) states, "Being a learner, a lifelong adult learner, is the most important characteristic of a school leader and of a professional" (p. 219). Kochan, Bredeson and Riehl (2002) explain, "The school leader sets the tone, direction, and climate for learning. It is therefore imperative that the principal serve as a 'model learner' in their school" (p. 299).

While principals are still ultimately responsible for their own professional growth, districts and universities play a central role in providing ongoing support and development matched to every career stage (Alvy & Robbins, 2005; Anderson et al., 2004; Fink & Resnick, 2001; Stewart, Davenport, & Lufti,

2006). In 2013, the National Association for Secondary School Principals published a report entitled: What the Research Says About the Importance of Principal Leadership. In this document they recommend, "The content and focus [of principal professional development] should be individualized, with a tight link between principal evaluation and development opportunities … and efforts should be made to provide development that is job-embedded" (p. 10). Spanneut and colleagues specified, "Principals need continuous opportunities to upgrade their knowledge and skills. Professional development opportunities should be tailored to the needs of the participants and geared to actual leadership roles" (2012, p. 26).

Finding practical ways to build the capacity of principals is paramount as it has been shown to impact the academic achievement of students and the overall quality of our schools. One approach for providing principal development with the above characteristics is for districts to partner with universities in sponsoring principal institutes or academies (Peterson, 2002).

Chapman provided some clear criteria to districts and universities interested in providing the most effective professional development to principals:

> Vital to leadership learning is the interplay of a number of elements: study of the relevant theoretical disciplines and the substantive domains of professional knowledge and competence; critically reflective practice; engagement in field-based learning activities and peer-supported networks. A co-operative approach among learning providers is required to enable coverage of all elements (2005, p. 15).

The Brigham Young University Principals Academy (BYUPA) was initiated in 2002 as a unified way for the university and five local school districts to collaboratively support the learning and development of principals.

The BYU-Public School Partnership's Governing Board consists of the superintendents from all of the five partner school districts, the CITES director, and the dean of the BYU's McKay School of Education. Initially, the BYUPA was a four-year program focused on helping principals develop professional learning communities (PLCs) in their schools.

In 2003, the BYUPA was condensed into a two-year program, as most of the schools in the partnership had already developed successful PLC practices. In the current BYUPA structure, principals meet for approximately twenty days over a two-year period, with an emphasis on refining PLCs and increasing the leadership capacity of school administrators. Since 2002, over 400 principals and assistant principals have graduated from this program

Study Purpose and Research Questions

To strengthen BYUPA and in the process contribute to the research on principal professional development, we have conducted studies on participant and stakeholder viewpoints. Following research on past and current academy participants (Boren, Hallam, Ray, Gill, & Kuanchen 2017), we have expanded our perspective to consider the experiences and perceptions of principal supervisors, who react to the academy in terms of outcomes and results observed on the district level over many years of participation. From

these supervisors we have gained significant understanding that is guiding improvements in our Principals Academy function and outcomes.

More specifically, we asked the following research questions:

1. What impact has the BYUPA had on your district?

2. How can the university partner with district leadership in determining the primary learning outcomes of the academy?

3. How might the university and districts effectively partner in selecting participants, ensuring participation, supporting participants in applying their learning experience?

4. How should the effectiveness of the BYUPA be evaluated?

Methods

In seeking to gain clarity on these questions, we used purposive sampling, focus group interviews, with qualitative methods of analysis. Having over 16 principal supervisors who could have been included in this study, we employed a purposive, non-randomized, maximum variation sampling scheme with the intent to create a focus group that most closely represented the districts being sampled (Patton, 2002). We chose to stratify our sample by district (five participating), gender (male or female), and the school level supervised (elementary or secondary). Due to principal supervisors' schedules, our final focus group had fewer participants than we had initially hoped, but sufficient variation to make the results meaningful. The seven participants represented four of the five partnership districts, with a balance of elementary and secondary principal supervisors; one participant was female and six were male. (See Table 1)

Table 1

District Student Count, District Participation and Principal Supervisor Gender and Participation

Partnership Districts	Student Count (Total: 183,948)	Elementary Supervisors (n=4/9)	Secondary Supervisors (n=3/7)
District 1*	52, 509	Female 1* Female 2	Male 1 Male 2*
District 2*	77,457	Female 1 Female 2 Male 1 Male 2*	Male 1* Male 2
District 3*	14,679	Male 1*	Male 1*
District 4*	6,477	Male 1*	Male 1
District 5**	32,826	Female 1**	Male 1

*Participated in focus group

**Invited but unable to participate in focus group

We chose to use a focus group because "a group session has chemistry and dynamic that are more than the sum of its members' comments … The synergy in the group interaction usually prompts greater breadth and depth of information and comparison of views" than individual interviews (Carey & Asbury, 2012, pp. 11, 18). In preparation for the group session, we created a bank of semi-structured interview questions for data collection. Our initial qualitative analysis followed the basic framework proposed by Marshall and Rossman (1999) of organizing the data; generating categories, themes, and patterns; coding the data; testing emergent understandings and searching for alternative explanations; and writing the report.

We split our research team into two groups, tasking each to simultaneously organize the data and generate themes. A third independent group then sought to reconcile, summarize, and synthesize the work of these two into meaningful themes, patterns, relationships, and recommendations. We are confident that this quasi double-blind approach led us to the most important themes, patterns, and relationships identified by the principal supervisors participating in the focus group.

Results

While our qualitative analysis resulted in meaningful themes, patterns, and relationships, we chose to report our results by following the natural flow in which the principal supervisors

spoke about the various themes. We provide each research question, along with selected answers from supervisors, accompanied by supporting external research. We hope that this reporting process will allow readers to easily transfer these findings to their unique situations.

Research Question 1: What impact has the BYUPA had on your district?

Most of the district supervisors reported enthusiasm and appreciation for the impact the BYUPA has had and continues to have on the attending principals. Many spoke of it as a "career highlight" (B2), continuing that the "readings are on point, the guest speakers are enlightening, and the learning is cutting edge" (B2).

Networking
Our supervisors acknowledged that principals have a demanding role and often feel isolated and inadequate to handle the demands of the position thus networking has been one of the most valuable aspects of the BYUPA. "One of the greatest benefits aside from a new perspective is just the networking and collegiality that is built among the different schools and districts" (A2).

The safety of a place to discuss their challenges with principals who share them is seen as invaluable. A supervisor with a similar view stressed vulnerability and risks. "The principal's seat can be pretty vulnerable, and now you have a group of colleagues as thinking partners, which I think is created through that PLC (professional learning community) model. They can ask questions in a risk-free environment" (C2).

Another stressed the value of exchanging solutions for shared challenges, referring to BYUPA as a "safety net [for principals] to realize that they are facing the

same challenges as others [and] can talk and find out what others are doing to make it work" (C1).

Principals themselves expressed the desire to collaborate and network with other principals, in responding to our previous study with current and former attendees (Boren et al., 2017) consistent with other findings in the literature (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Salazar 2007). Neale and Cone (2013) reported that nearly three out of four principals who attended the School Leaders Network indicated they had become stronger, more confident leaders as a result of learning with other principals (p. 5).

Reflection and engagement
One of the main reasons our supervisors supported the BYUPA is that it gives their principals time for "deep reflection, which we find as professionals is quickly gone … [which] is critical as it helps principals begin to design a system in their building" (A1). Considering the complexity of the principals' daily work, if they are not given time and space for reflection, they may not reflect often enough—possibly not at all.

Perhaps contributing to principal supervisors' positive reaction to BYUPA is that it meets many of the criteria set forth by Chapman (2005) and others (Brown et al., 2002; Cardno, 2005) in supporting the needs of acting principals: study of relevant theories, critical reflective practice in peer-supported networks, and engagement in field-based practical learning, backed by time and resources from the district, with a cooperative approach among the university and local districts.

Principal supervisors gratefully acknowledged that most of these critical elements are already in place, and they also

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provided some helpful recommendations for reinforcing, revisiting, or strengthening them while moving forward in implementing the professional learning process.

Improved principal practice
Several supervisors mentioned visible improvements in principal leadership practices among BYUPA participants. For example, "It helps our principals begin to design a system, how we align all of our practices instead of having isolated practices" (A1).

Similarly, "It provides that second go-around that really starts to solidify their learning" (C2). One supervisor summed it this way, "I think it takes their learning to another level because now they've had a few years of experience, they can add theory to their experience and then go back and enhance their practical work" (B1). Supervisors agreed that the biggest impact of the BYUPA was in the increased leadership capacity of their principals.

Research Question 2: How can the university partner with district leadership in determining the primary learning outcomes of the academy?
When asked if they could confidently articulate the primary learning targets of the BYUPA, supervisors' immediate response was "no" or "probably not." One supervisor added, "I think we could certainly say, but I don't know if we'd get it correct" (B1). We asked them to try.

One respondent ventured to say, "To strengthen principal capacity through an immersion experience in literature from current trends in school leadership in a collaborative environment partnership wide" (B2). This comment was quickly followed by this statement: "I think if we could find agreement

on what those principal competencies are, that [agreement], if addressed in the academy, would strengthen all participants" (B1).

Focus and specificity
One supervisor suggested that a more clear, focused, simplified set of learning outcomes and materials would improve the academy.

As good as the material is in Principals Academy, it is a little bit of a hodge-podge right now. And so that it doesn't become just people's favorite energizing topic … we could ask district leadership what are these domains of leadership that we want our principals to be developed in … it would give the people running the BYUPA a better filter to pull materials through … it would just be more purposeful (B2).

Suggestions about how to more narrowly focus the BYUPA and then move to the application stage were shared. One of our supervisors suggested a process to better utilize the districts in organizing and facilitating the learning their principals are experiencing in the BYUPA.

It would be healthy for the partnership districts to come together and define what we expect principals to know and to be able to do. And if we could come to a consensus on five or six domains, we would know that they are learning and getting work in those domains (B1).

Another expressed similar approval and gave an example:

I like this idea of developing proficiencies that we've identified and agreed upon among the partnering districts … that participants will have mastered; maybe it's a skill-based

proficiency around being PLCs [or another] leadership piece in the building (C2).

One supervisor summarized the needs for focus and enhanced partnership: If the BYUPA was able to "focus on a few things rather than 25 things … mastering a few things would make [principals] feel empowered to continue to move forward with their work—linking towards that change process in their building" (A1). He concluded, "I think it would really just help us align our practices with your practices and really feel like it's a partnership" (A1).

State standards
Clearly supervisors viewed the proposal for specifically defined domains for their principals' professional development in the BYUPA as a positive step. A brief discussion suggested that the state leadership standards might inform BYUPA, but not guide it.

One participant recommended:

"I think there ought to be at least some engagement with those standards to [discern if] we are wandering strange roads … or aligned with what's out there in terms of expectations for principals" (B1).

However, others cautioned to avoid letting the state standards drive the BYUPA curriculum:

"An awareness yes, to form the structural backbone I would say no. It would lose its inspirational quality. It would turn into an in-service then, and the turn-off meter would go way up if it was structured around the standards like that" (B2).

Another reminded the group of the diversity in the districts represented:

"We don't want to get too pigeon-holed into specific areas; they need to be broad enough that they can be used across all districts" (C2).

Communication and collaboration
Another theme raised was that communication between the BYUPA administrators and districts had been inadequate. One participant expressed: "I'm not sure who's in charge of determining what topics or ideas are going to be shared, and that's, I guess, a lack of understanding on my part" (C1).

Another supervisor agreed and extended, "I feel similarly. And to take that a little further, if there was more communication, I think we would be able to provide better support for principals, both at the building level and also at the district level" (B2). Another noted similar lack of communication: "I would say the collaboration that I have is just with the principals who are involved and not coming through any kind of district channel" (A1).

The BYUPA seems to have drifted slightly from its original design as a collaborative effort between the university and local districts. The districts still support the BYUPA financially and philosophically, but as these comments reveal, district leadership has little substantive awareness of the BYUPA desired learning outcomes and a limited role in planning and delivering the program for achieving those outcomes.

Principal supervisors seem to agree that "effective training programs should be the joint effort of schools, government admins, and academics" (Wong, 2004, p. 142). As one supervisor expressed: "We need to align our

practices instead of having isolated practices because that is when you begin to see change" (A1). If the BYUPA and the partner school districts worked together to define desired outcomes and conduct program delivery, the benefits of this two-year professional development program could be magnified.

Research Question 3: How might the university and districts effectively partner in selecting participants, encouraging participation, and supporting participants in applying their learning experience?

Selection

Selection of BYUPA attendees has varied widely in the participating districts. Principal supervisors make selections in some districts, the district cabinet takes care of this in others, and the superintendent and assistant superintendent make these decisions in others. None of the districts have a formal application process.

Career stages

While some research suggests differentiated professional development programs for aspiring principals, newly inducted principals, and long-time principals (Wong, 2004), the BYUPA has not targeted their program toward principals at a particular career stage or in particular types of schools.

Thus, participating districts have varied in their views about who should attend. Some districts have limited their selection pool to acting principals, while others have seen some benefit in having their high-potential assistant principals and district office personnel attend. One supervisor explained, "It's been very interesting to see that they do get something out of it [regardless of their] state." (D1). Another supervisor specified, "We have allowed

assistant principals who are sharp, who are ready to take the material and contribute" (B2).

A few supervisors were a little more hesitant in sending assistant principals, but felt that attending did build enthusiasm for moving up to a principal position (C1). A supervisor explained his district's policy, "I think even if you could cognitively know what the duties of a principal are … until you are actually the principal you just have no idea what your role is … we've only sent principals" (A2).

Objectives and outcomes

The apparent discrepancy in selection approaches may be partially due to an inaccurate or incomplete understanding of the intended learning outcomes of the BYUPA. When asked who should attend, one supervisor brought the discussion back to this situation: "It gets back to that mission and vision. What are the objectives that we're trying to accomplish?" (C2). Another supervisor was more specific about this need:

> [Clear objectives] would help us in our selection process as well, because then we would be able to look for those specific competencies and be able to say, "We feel like this is the right experience for this person" … We want to get the right people in the seat so that we can bring those promising practices back to the district and have people that are ready (A1).

While current participants seem to have a positive experience, more clarity about program outcomes would likely allow districts and the university to better target individuals who would benefit from the program and further customize the experience in ways that

more effectively address the unique experiences of these leaders in their specific roles, career stages, and circumstances (Stewart, Davenport, & Lufti, 2006).

Participation and implementation

After inviting school leaders to participate in BYUPA, district supervisors have assumed that those invited to attend will participate fully in the academy for the good of their schools. "I think we're just assuming they're all there and present and engaged and prepared" (A1). In accordance with adult learning theories, supervisors are hesitant to dictate overly specific expectations that could potentially interfere with adults' rich, self-directed learning (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011).

Previous research in this area would suggest that principals appreciate this low-stress approach; the same research also suggests that participants could erroneously view loose expectations as low expectations, resulting in spotty attendance and sub-par participation from some individuals (Boren et al., 2017). One of the supervisors demonstrated the pro-con: "Anyone that I would recommend, I would assume full engagement. I wouldn't recommend them if I thought they would not attend or would not read [assigned materials]. But I don't think we ever get a reporting back on attendance or engagement" (B1). The job of principal is also constantly subject to unexpected issues that require immediate attention, sometimes requiring the principal to miss a BYUPA session.

Supportive expectations

It would likely be easier for supervisors to set supportive expectations for participants if they accurately understood not only the purposes of the BYUPA, but the specific learning outcomes anticipated for each session and who had been able to attend. "It would be nice ideally to be

able to follow up with them afterward and know exactly what they learned, and ask some questions and get some feedback from them," one supervisor explained (A2). Another filled in rationale:

> If there was more communication about that, I think we would be able to provide better support for them, both in the building level and then also at the district level … It gets back to that idea of taking the work that's going on [in the BYUPA] and helping to make the transfer into practice (C2).

Another supervisor envisioned an even more active role:

> I would love, as a supervisor, to have access to [the BYUPA] materials, even just be on the email list, or whatever you do as you prepare for them to come … [so] we can become good thinking partners with those we supervise and really probe more deeply … "Here's the reading, what does that look like?" (A1).

Supervisors hope BYUPA will fulfill its potential to change principals' practice and improve their learning. One felt participation should be a form of commitment:

> It begs the question, "why take all the time out of the day and away from the buildings if we're not helping them to build their capacity and then apply it?" … I think that given the investment in this we definitely want to see some follow through, some application of this. It can't be simply a kind of a feel good, living in the theoretical experience, if they don't make that transfer to practice (C2).

This sentiment was supported by another supervisor, "There should be some type of collective commitment … to determine what the actionable step is … based on what your school needs are" (A1).

Another participant stressed that applying what they learn at Principals Academy is not a matter of *whether* the principal is going to make changes; it's a matter of choosing *which* applications will be most suitable for the individual school:

> A tight-loose approach is critical because we have to differentiate … allow for differentiation with those principals in their own buildings … Perhaps on that one tight part you say, "You're going to take something away from this, and you gotta apply something in your building. We'll let you decide what that is, but take something away" (A2).

Supervisors would likely be able to provide clearer initial expectations and better support for meaningful implementation, if they understood specifically which outcomes were targeted in each session, were provided the topics and materials involved, and were apprised of who was able to attend and participate and who might need some make-up instruction and support.

Research Question 4: How should the effectiveness of the BYUPA be evaluated?

Participant improvement

One supervisor noticed that those who engaged more fully in the experience seem to experience more subsequent success; thus, noting success among participants would be one indication of impact.

> I remember that we had one that did not take it seriously and then one that did. And just juxtaposing those two [we could see that] those that attend and take it seriously … [have] scores of achievement and direction and culture of leadership in that building [which have] been at a higher level than those that haven't attended. It's hard to quantify that, but I think they're definitely better off for it (D1).

Another supervisor shared his perception that BYUPA participants definitely improve in their ability to lead schools: "You see increased capacity in principals' ability to lead learning … Principals that participate in BYUPA go after learning better" (B1).

Other sources of feedback

One supervisor suggested, "If you're looking for ways to measure it, I think there are whole different tiers of feedback that you can get, or should get" (C2). This report implements one suggestion for feedback tiers: feedback from principals' supervisors. Additionally, gathering views of teachers, students, and other stakeholders regarding changes in principal leadership during and beyond the academy was also recommended. One supervisor suggested that reviewing improvement in the schools' student learning data over time may be the most objective and revealing data for evaluating a principal's academy (B1).

Another supervisor described how this might look: "We need to work more closely with our principals in helping them find those actions that are making that difference down to the classroom level with students, and ask for them to share evidence with us" (A1). If students learning over time doesn't improve, it is hard to make the case that the academy was effective (Hill, Hawk, & Taylor, 2001).

Admittedly, a lack of clearly stated learning outcomes makes it challenging to evaluate BYUPA's effectiveness. Each of the forms of feedback and evaluation referred to in this section rely primarily on supervisors' fuzzy perception that leadership has improved in ways that better support student learning. There seems to be a lack of clear, valid, reliable, and objective measures that would establish program effectiveness.

As one supervisor noted in discussing effective program evaluation: "It's all about the BYUPA outcomes. Coming back to your objectives" (C2). Establishing clear outcomes will allow program facilitators and partnership districts to co-design relevant measures of program effectiveness that will allow for continual program evaluation and improvement.

Conclusion

Principal supervisors see the BYUPA as a positive way for participants to network, reflect, rejuvenate, and increase in leadership capacity. They noted improvements evident in these principals' practice. Participants seem to benefit regardless of district, position, or career stage. But as one supervisor posited, "I just think there is greater potential that we have not yet tapped into" (A1).

Based on feedback from the supervisor focus group, one of the best ways to tap into that latent potential, would be for the university and districts to co-develop essential learning outcomes for BYUPA that align specifically with districts' needs. This co-development of outcomes would likely result in a healthy balance of the theoretical from the university and practical from the districts.

Knowing these intended outcomes will allow principal supervisors to better select participants who will benefit in terms of those outcomes, nurture participants' growth while they are in the program, and facilitate implementation of program learning. Not only will this tighter program coordination improve communication between the university and districts, supervisors believe that it will contribute to greater capacity in individual participants and improve learning for students in the schools.

In addition, supervisors believe that districts and universities will benefit not only from co-creating desired learning outcomes, but also from working as full partners in all aspects of the planning, delivery, and evaluation of a university-multiple district principals academy.

The findings here point to many possibilities for improved university-district partnership in the BYU Principals Academy, and point to potential implications for others engaged in similar efforts. While these findings suggest some salient themes, we invite more diverse, widespread, yet targeted research on how different partnering structures, processes, practices, and outcomes impact principal development and student learning. This expanded understanding of principal professional develop could help policy makers and system leaders looking to improve and scale principal development efforts that ultimately contribute to improved student learning.

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