

Leaders Are Readers: What Journals Do Public School Superintendents Read?

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Abstract

This study involving 233 participants from ten states sought to identify the types of educational journals practicing superintendents read. The findings indicate that the majority of superintendents are reading publications provided by professional and trade organizations rather than peer-reviewed journals. Across all subgroups, *Educational Leadership*, *School Administrator*, *Education Week*, and *The American School Board Journal* were the four most frequently read periodicals. The majority of superintendents are reading publications provided by professional and trade organizations rather than peer-reviewed journals.

Key Words

superintendents, educational leadership, educational administration, journals, faculty, magazines

One of the many roles of the K-12 school superintendent is instructional leader. In this role the consummate educator is expected to epitomize the educational slogan, *leaders are readers*.

Amid all the responsibilities of school superintendents, do they really have time to read? If so, what are they reading? In 2005, Anderson et al. posed the question, “How can busy school administrators stay abreast of issues in their field?” (p. 1). Their inquiry acknowledged the complex schedules of practicing school leaders and the impact those schedules have on individual professional development.

Since that time the roles of school administrators has become more complex, further complicating the time they have to engage in purposeful development activities (Walker et al., 2021) including keeping up with and reading what is being published in professional and peer-reviewed journals.

While there is a wealth of research seeking to explore aspects of the role of scholarly research in the lives of school leaders (Anderson et al., 2005; Borgemenke & Brown, 2013; Wang & Bowers, 2016), very limited studies focus on the most senior educator in the district, the superintendent.

Therefore, additional research is needed to understand the publications practicing school leaders are reading. Exploring this topic informs the field of educational leadership in several ways. First, it informs leadership preparation programs by suggesting reading sources to utilize in coursework (see Borgemenke & Brown, 2013; Mayo et al. 2006). Further, it guides educational leadership scholars in identifying which journals reach large populations of

practitioners (see Wang & Bowers, 2016; Richardson & McLeod, 2009).

This research builds upon current scholarship to fill the gap in the literature exploring the role scholarly research plays in the life of K-12 superintendents. Specifically, the purpose of this descriptive study was to understand the professional publications practicing public school superintendents read, and to understand how these publications align with where educational leadership faculty tend to publish their studies.

Literature Review

Several studies since Anderson et al. (2005) have sought to understand the role scholarly research plays in the professional lives of educational leadership personnel. While many of the studies focused on the professorial side of educational leadership (Borgemenke & Brown, 2013; Mayo et al., 2006; Oplatka, 2009; Richardson & McLeod, 2009), others explored aspects of journals published for educational leaders (Aypay et al., 2010; Cherkowski et al., 2012; Moore & Stewart, 2015; Wang & Bowers, 2016); however, very few focused on the K-12 side of the educational leadership spectrum (Anderson et al., 2005; Penuel et al., 2018; Zirkel, 2007).

The void in current literature focusing on what educational leadership scholarship school superintendents are reading can be seen as a disconnect between educational leadership scholars and educational leadership practitioners. Bridging the gap between these two entities of educational leadership has the potential to positively impact the educational outcomes across diverse aspects of education.

This study was informed by scholarship exploring aspects of scholarly research in relation to the field of educational leadership.

To make sense of this scholarship, key aspects will be presented across two categories: educational leadership professoriate, and educational leadership practitioners.

Educational leadership professoriate

Journal articles in the educational leadership professoriate category explore connections between scholarship and those that produce it, educational leadership researchers.

Borgemenke and Brown (2013) examined whose research was being cited by educational leadership scholarship producers. In doing so, they examined nearly 300 articles published between 2006 and 2010 in the *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation (IJELP)*. The findings identified 10 authors (1 organization, 9 individuals) cited most frequently over a 5-year period.

Of the nine individuals cited as educational leadership experts in this study, only two (2) were reported to have school administration experience. Borgemenke and Brown (2013) concluded that there is a knowledge base in the field of education leadership being accessed by ‘users’ through *IJELP*. The authors did not specify the professional roles of the ‘users.’ However, they did note the importance of being aware of the width of a journal’s distribution and readership.

Mayo et al., (2006) explored which journals educational leadership professors were reading. The findings reported seven top-ranked educational leadership periodicals (*Educational Administration Quarterly [EAQ]*, *American Educational Research Journal [AERJ]*, *Educational Leadership*, *Phi Delta Kappan (PDK)*, *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis [EEPA]*, *Journal of School Leadership [JSL]*, & *Educational Researcher*). In a later study Richardson & McLeod (2009)

examined *EAQ* and *JSL* to identify which journals were cited in the articles published within these two respective journals from 2000 to 2007. Their study found that researchers publishing in *EAQ* and *JSL* referenced journals inconsistent with those reportedly read by educational leadership professors. Both studies (Mayo et al., 2006; Richardson & McLeod, 2009) identified scholarly journals and practitioner journals in the top-ranked journals read by educational leadership professors.

Some of the scholarship examining educational leadership professors focused more on aspects of the journals in which they were published instead of the scholars themselves (Aypay et al., 2010; Cherkowski et al., 2012; Moore & Stewart, 2015; Wang & Bowers, 2016). Of these Wang & Bowers (2016) is most notable to this study. As Wang and Bowers (2016) mapped educational administration research, a sub-field of the discipline of education, they found that the field interacts readily with other sub-fields of education, other disciplines, and research internationally. Further, their citation network analysis illuminated ways in which knowledge of the field is exchanged and disseminated.

A key takeaway from the above cited studies is that knowledge across the field of educational leadership is frequently created through publication in journals (Borgemenke & Brown, 2013; Wang & Bowers, 2016). Therefore, the dissemination of this knowledge (i.e., journal distribution and readership) are vital to building capacity and expanding the field (Borgemenke & Brown, 2013; Wang & Bowers, 2016). For this reason, we question what educational leaders read to inform their practice.

Educational leadership practitioners

There are very few published studies exploring what educational leadership practitioners read

to inform their practice (Anderson et al., 2005; Penuel et al. 2018; Zirkel, 2007). Anderson et al. (2005), the impetus for this article, described the journals that educational leaders read. The study, over fifteen years ago, considered the journals award-winning school leaders and educational leadership professors read. The study surveyed 60 participants from the following two groups: (1) K-12 principals of Blue Ribbons Schools for the 2001-2002 school year and (2) chairs of university educational administration departments.

The results of the study identified *Educational Leadership* (93% of the respondents), *NASSP Bulletin* (67% of the respondents), *American Educational Research Journal* (60% of the respondents), *School Administrator* (60% of the respondents), and *The American School Board Journal* (42% of the respondents) as the top five journals cited by respondents. Anderson et al. (2005) surveyed a mix of practicing K-12 principals and education faculty; therefore, it is not surprising that a mix of practitioner and peer-reviewed publications were most widely read. This survey did not distinguish between the publications practitioners and academics read and was limited to a specific group of K-12 principals.

Zirkel (2007) took a different approach than Anderson et al., (2005) and highlights potential disconnects between educational leadership researchers and educational leadership practitioners. In doing so, Zirkel compares which periodicals are read by the two groups and further, how they are rated for quality. The findings note that the two groups, scholars and practitioners, do not read the same periodicals, which further suggests these choices may be associated with affiliation to specific professional organizations (see also Mayo et al., 2006).

Penuel et al., (2018) did not make comparisons between scholars and practitioners. Instead, their research explored K-12 district leaders' use of research, what they found useful and which task they reported using research to complete. Their findings note that district leaders tend to seek out and utilize “scholarship that is largely conceptual or prescriptive, written by those both in and outside of the academy, published in books, and covering a wide range of topics” (Penuel et al., 2018, 549). While the result of this research is helpful, it does not directly address the specific role of district superintendent. Similarly, Anderson et al.’s (2005) investigation did not specifically involve public school superintendents; however, it serves as the best identified source of comparison for this study.

Exploring extant research since 2005 examining the roles of scholarship in the lives of school leaders it has become apparent that little is known about similar relationships and the consummate educator in the school district.

The question remains, are district level leaders really readers? While it is easy to assume that school superintendents do read scholarly works to influence their decision making, it is not clear if their influences are rooted in peer-reviewed articles or practitioner- based articles. This study seeks to respond to these general questions by asking superintendents directly what they read.

The research questions were:

1. What are the types of publications practicing public school superintendents read?
2. How do the publications practicing public school superintendents read compare with the literature describing the field of educational leadership?

Exploring these questions provides a glimpse into the impact scholarly journals have on district superintendents as the top decision maker for all things education.

Methods

The population of this study consists of all superintendents in the contiguous 48 United States of America. In order to obtain a representative sample of superintendents, the states were divided into five regions: Pacific, Rocky Mountain, Southwest, Midwest, Southeast, and Northeast.

Two states were selected from each region: California and Washington (Pacific); Montana and Nevada (Rocky Mountain); Oklahoma and Texas (Southwest); Iowa and Minnesota (Midwest); Arkansas and North Carolina (Southeast); and New Jersey and Rhode Island (Northeast). All public school superintendents in these states were sent a survey to understand the professional publications they read, based upon a list of 29 possible journals.

Survey

For this exploratory descriptive study, the researchers developed a twelve question survey which asked participants to share demographic information including highest degree obtained, year of earning their highest degree, year earning their leadership credential, years as a K-12 administrator, years in current role, gender, and race. In addition, participants were asked to indicate up to five journals in the area of educational

administration/leadership that they most frequently read. In order to cast the widest possible net, the researchers first included all journals listed more than once from within several different sources.

First, we looked at the top 25 journals cited in each of *EAQ* and *JSL* from 2000 to 2007 as noted in Richardson & McLeod (2009) in order to ensure we considered the journals most widely cited by educational leadership faculty. Next, in order to ensure our list was up to date, we consulted the top 20 educational administration journals according to Google Scholar on February 2, 2020.

Finally, we consulted the only available known report of journals practicing school leaders read (Anderson et al. 2005). In addition to journals listed more than once within Richardson and McLeod (2009) two lists and Google Scholar's list, we included any journal that was solely listed in the Anderson et al. (2005) survey for comparison purposes. The only journal we did not include from the Anderson et al. (2005) list was *School Foodservice and Nutrition*, because it no longer appears to be published.

Table 1 provides a list of the 29 journals included in the survey. In addition to selecting from the provided list, participants were also able to write in the name(s) of up to three journal(s) for choices not listed. To answer this study's research questions, only the questions regarding highest degree obtained, gender, race, and journals read were used in the data analysis.

Table 1*List of Educational Leadership Journals Included in Survey*

Journals	Cited in
Administrative Science Quarterly	EAQ, JSL
American Educational Research Journal (AERJ)	EAQ, JSL, Anderson
American School Board Journal (ASBJ)	JSL, Anderson
Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning	Anderson
Education and Urban Society	EAQ, JSL, ELJ
Education Week	EAQ, JSL
Educational Administration Quarterly (EAQ)	EAQ, JSL, ELJ
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis	EAQ, JSL
Educational Leadership	EAQ, JSL, ELJ, Anderson
Educational Policy	EAQ, ELJ
Educational Researcher	EAQ, JSL
Elementary School Journal	EAQ, JSL
Harvard Educational Review (HER)	EAQ, JSL, Anderson
International Journal of Leadership in Education	JSL, ELJ
Journal of Applied Psychology	EAQ, JSL
Journal of Educational Administration (JEA)	EAQ, JSL, ELJ
Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education	EAQ, JSL
Journal of School Leadership (JSL)	EAQ, JSL, ELJ
NASSP Bulletin	JSL, Anderson
National Forum of Educational Administration and Supervision	Anderson
Phi Delta Kappan (PDK)	EAQ, JSL, ELJ
Review of Educational Research	EAQ, JSL
School Administrator (AASA)	JSL, Anderson
School Effectiveness and School Improvement	EAQ, JSL, ELJ
Teachers College Record	EAQ, JSL
Techniques: Connecting Education and Careers	Anderson
The Learning Professional (Formerly: Journal of Staff Development)	Anderson
Trusteeship	Anderson
Urban Education	EAQ, JSL

Note. EAQ = journals cited within EAQ as noted in Richardson & McLeod (2009), JSL = journals cited with JSL as noted in Richardson & McLeod (2009), ELJ = journals within top 20 educational leadership journals according to Google Scholar on February 2, 2020, Anderson = journals noted in Anderson et al. (2005).

Data collection and analysis

The research team obtained a total of 4882 superintendent email addresses from the respective state department of education web sites. Superintendents in these ten states were sent an institutional research board approved query inviting them to participate in the study.

A reminder e-mail was sent to all participants at two week and four week increments throughout February, March and April 2021. Of these email addresses, 82 of them were duplicates and 167 of them were no

valid longer valid leaving 4633 potential superintendent participants.

A total of 253 participants started the survey; however, upon review, 233 surveys (5.0% usable response rate) were fully completed following the data collection period. Given the context of this investigation, one limitation may be that those that do not regularly read journals at all are underrepresented in this data set. Table 2 describes the gender and highest degree obtained of the participants.

Table 2

Gender and Highest Degree Obtained of Superintendents

Degree	Female	Male	Total
Masters	12	52	64
Specialist	9	55	64
Doctorate	41	64	105
Total	62	171	233

Because some participants wrote in the names of journals that were actually noted in the list, the research team re-tabulated and

verified the results after exporting them from the electronic survey platform.

Results

The 233 superintendents participating in this investigation read a total of 66 unique journals. The number of occurrences for any particular journal ranged from 0 to 173.

Table 3 presents the distribution of the top 10 journals in descending order, starting with the journals most often read by all superintendents.

Tables 4, 5, 6, and 7 present the distribution of the top 10 journals read by male superintendents, female superintendents,

superintendents with a doctorate degree, and superintendents with a masters or specialist degree, respectively.

In each of these tables, the percentages add up to more than 100%, because participants could select *up to* five journals. *Educational Leadership*, *School Administrator*, *Education Week*, and *ASBJ* were read most often, although in different order depending upon the subgroup. *NASSP Bulletin* was the fifth most frequently read publication overall and among each of the different demographics.

Table 3*Journals Read by All Superintendents (n=233)*

Journal	Number (Percentage) of Participants Reading Each Journal
Educational Leadership	173 (74.3%)
School Administrator	150 (64.4%)
Education Week	120 (51.5%)
ASBJ	66 (28.3%)
NASSP Bulletin	48 (20.6%)
HER	23 (9.9%)
JEA	23 (9.9%)
PDK	20 (8.6%)
AERJ	19 (8.2%)
District Administration	12 (5.2%)
The Learning Professional (Formerly: Journal of Staff Development)	11 (4.7%)
Other journals combined (n=55)	93 (39.9%)
I do not frequently read educational leadership journals	35 (15.0%)

Table 4*Journals Read by Male Superintendents (n=171)*

Journal	Number (Percentage) of Participants Reading Each Journal
Educational Leadership	121 (70.8%)
School Administrator	112 (65.5%)
Education Week	81 (47.4%)
ASBJ	51 (29.8%)
NASSP Bulletin	38 (22.2%)
JEA	17 (9.9%)
HER	13 (7.6%)
PDK	13 (7.6%)
AERJ	11 (6.4%)
District Administration	8 (4.7%)
JSL	5 (2.9%)
Other journals combined (n=44)	60 (35.1%)
I do not frequently read educational leadership journals	30 (17.5%)

Table 5*Journals Read by Female Superintendents (n=62)*

Journal	Number (Percentage) of Participants Reading Each Journal
Educational Leadership	51 (82.2%)
Education Week	39 (62.9%)
School Administrator	38 (61.3%)
ASBJ	15 (24.2%)
NASSP Bulletin	10 (16.1%)
HER	9 (14.5%)
AERJ	7 (11.3%)
The Learning Professional (Formerly: Journal of Staff Development)	7 (11.3%)
EAQ	6 (9.7%)
JEA	6 (9.7%)
PDK	6 (9.7%)
Other journals combined (n=23)	29 (46.8%)
I do not frequently read educational leadership journals	5 (8.1%)

Table 6*Journals Read by Superintendents with a Doctorate Degree (n=105)*

Journal	Number (Percentage) of Participants Reading Each Journal
Educational Leadership	84 (80%)
School Administrator	70 (66.7%)
Education Week	64 (60.1%)
ASBJ	33 (31.4%)
NASSP Bulletin	19 (18.1%)
HER	15 (17.1%)
JEA	15 (14.3%)
AERJ	12 (11.4%)
PDK	12 (11.4%)
JEA	6 (5.7%)
PDK	6 (5.7%)
Other journals combined (n=29)	45 (42.9%)
I do not frequently read educational leadership journals	8 (7.6%)

Table 7*Journals Read by Superintendents with Masters or Specialist Degree (n=128)*

Journal	Number (Percentage) of Participants Reading Each Journal
Educational Leadership	89 (69.5%)
School Administrator	80 (62.5%)
Education Week	56 (43.8%)
ASBJ	33 (25.8%)
NASSP Bulletin	29 (22.7%)
District Administration	9 (7.0%)
HER	8 (6.3%)
JEA	8 (6.3%)
PDK	8 (6.3%)
AERJ	7 (5.5%)
School Effectiveness and School Improvement	3 (2.3%)
The Learning Professional (Formerly: Journal of Staff Development)	3 (2.3%)
School CEO	3 (2.3%)
Other journals combined (n=32)	36 (28.15)
I do not frequently read educational leadership journals	15 (11.7%)

Discussion

Educational Leadership, *School Administrator*, and *Education Week*, and *The American School Board Journal* were the top four publications read by all superintendents, male superintendents, female superintendents, superintendents with a doctoral degree, and superintendents with a masters or specialist degree; however, the order varied slightly among the groups.

While all demographics of superintendents in this study indicated they most often read *Educational Leadership*, one more female superintendent said she read *Education Week* when compared to *School Administrator*.

All four of these publications are editorial reviewed and except for *Education Week*, affiliated with a professional organization that superintendents may choose to join. *Educational Leadership* is a monthly member benefit of ASCD, *School Administrator* is a monthly member benefit of AASA, and *The American School Board Journal* is bi-monthly member benefit of the National School Board Association.

In addition, there were no notable differences in the top five publications read by superintendents with a doctorate degree when compared to those with a masters or specialist degree.

As Fusarelli (2008) noted, educational leaders are “are often so busy engaging in crisis management, administrivia, and the daily operations of schooling that they have little time to devote to thoughtful, reflective, research-based strategic planning and improvement” (p. 367) that these practitioner-oriented and professional organization endorsed publications may be viewed as the

most accessible for busy superintendents. This theme may also be supported by the 15% of superintendents who said they do not frequently read educational leadership journals.

The literature provides several potential reasons for this phenomenon including but not limited to a lack of accessibility due to busy schedules (Anderson et al, 2005; Penuel et al., 2018; Walker et al., 2021), focusing on journals published by disciplines that intimately interact with educational leadership (i.e., urban education, teacher education, content specific disciplines, international foci, etc.) (Mayo et al., 2006; Wang & Bowers, 2016), and the usefulness of book-bound research that provides frameworks and practical applications (Penuel et al., 2018) to be applied in real-time.

The impetus for our study was to expand upon the Anderson et al. (2005) report conducted over fifteen years ago. When comparing this list from 2005 with the results of the current study, *Educational Leadership* remains as the most frequently read publication.

In addition, superintendents prefer to read *School Administrator*, *NASSP Bulletin*, and *The American School Board Journal*, which were frequently read by the participants in Anderson et. al (2005). *AERJ* was not as frequently mentioned in the current study, perhaps because the participants in Anderson et al. (2005) included educational leadership faculty who may be more likely to read peer-reviewed journals. Yet, *NASSP Bulletin*, a peer-reviewed journal aimed at informing practice and decisions of middle and high school administrators was read with relative frequency across both studies.

Education Week, while read by approximately half of the superintendents in the current study, was not on the list of twelve journals provided to participants in Anderson et al. (2005). Based upon this comparison, practicing school superintendents continue to read practitioner-oriented journals (i.e. *Educational Leadership*, *School Administrator*, and *The American School Board Journal*) and the peer-reviewed *NASSP Bulletin*. Further, the results from this study align with the assertions from Penuel et al. (2018) that school leaders tend to read publications that are largely conceptual or prescriptive.

The knowledge base of the educational leadership field is growing. Richardson and McLeod (2009) provided a list of journals educational leadership professors should publish in, in order to get noticed by the top journals in the discipline, yet when comparing the results of the current study, educational leadership professors cite peer-reviewed journals such as *EAQ* and *JSL* the most.

NASSP Bulletin, *School Administrator*, and *Educational Leadership* also made the top 25 list of publications cited by educational leadership professors; however, they were cited less than 20% as often as the top peer-reviewed journals. This disparity suggests a disconnect between the journals prominent educational leadership faculty are publishing their scholarship and the journals practicing public school superintendents are reading. Confirming an assertion made by Zirkel (2007), the results of our study suggest that educational leadership professors and superintendents may not be reading, or at least in the case of professors, citing, the same periodicals.

The results of this study have implications for superintendents and educational leadership professors who wish to

influence practicing district leaders and expand the knowledge base of the field. Due to access and time constraints, public school superintendents may benefit from subscribing to services such as *The Marshall Memo* (Marshall, 2021), designed to provide a practitioner-friendly, weekly summary of important ideas and research articles in K-12 education. Schneider (2014) notes that research by education faculty often fails to penetrate the world of classroom practice, potentially due to educators' capacity to engage with educational scholarship.

The results of the current study also suggest that educational leadership professors may benefit from disseminating new ideas in publications such as *Educational Leadership* and *School Administrator* to accelerate their readership among public school superintendents. Future research should seek to understand the reasons why practicing public school superintendents choose to read these publications and how to overcome barriers for those who indicated they do not frequently read educational leadership journals.

Conclusion

Public school superintendents participating in this study most frequently read *Educational Leadership*, *School Administrator*, *Education Week*, and *The American School Board Journal*. It was found that the majority of superintendents are reading publications provided by professional and trade organizations rather than peer-reviewed journals.

Therefore, public school superintendents are obtaining their knowledge from primarily editor-reviewed, practitioner-oriented reviewed sources. While this may not be surprising to district leaders, this study gives some guidance to educational researchers as they select a potential outlet for their

writing. If the primary goal of educational scholarship is to influence practice, to grow the knowledge in the field of educational leadership, and bridge the gap between

scholars and practitioners, then publications should be prioritized where practitioners indicate they are most frequently reading.

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