

The Changing Role of Principals: Are District Leaders and University Preparation Programs Providing the Needed Supports?

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and the rapidly changing societal issues that it occasioned have accelerated the dynamic nature of the principalship. Changing demographics, technological advances, teachers' working conditions, social unrest, and in particular the global pandemic are among the factors driving this continuous role transformation. This study explored the ever-changing principalship and evolving professional support needed by school principals in a post-pandemic environment. This qualitative study included in-depth interviews with six sitting principals. We identified five themes—deep knowledge of technology, social-emotional support, school operations, collaboration and teamwork, and flexibility—which required further support. Our findings make plain the need for extensive cooperation, collaboration, and partnership between P-12 school districts and university leadership preparation providers.

Key Words

university partnership, principal support, principal, principalship, principal preparation

The literature shows an evolving principalship with expansive responsibilities (Horner & Jordan, 2020; Pollock, 2020; Richardson et al., 2016). Changing demographics, transience, emerging technologies, contemporary divisive social issues, policy changes, and in particular a worldwide pandemic are some of the variables underlying this dynamic makeover. School principals are facing precipitous challenges from the community, social controversies, and public disagreements.

The emotional stress and trauma caused by the pandemic and the societal unrest, disruption, and financial struggles it occasioned have affected adults and students alike. These factors influence students' capacity to learn and their feelings of safety. Principals increasingly find themselves confronting new situations and are required to address the well-being of all concerned personnel (adults and students) in their schools (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Pollock, 2020).

The recent pandemic has rapidly accelerated an already emerging movement for a different and alternative delivery of student instruction, leading to heightened expectations for principals to become digital instructional leaders (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Pollock, 2020).

Strong empirical evidence suggests that school principals are a primary variable in determining student learning (Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano et al., 2005; Suchter et al., 2017). Since the mid-1980s, robust efforts have been made to better define the knowledge base, curricula, standards, and quality practices of principal preparation programs (Jackson & Kelley, 2002). These efforts continued through the early 2000s, creating a growing body of research that provided a blueprint for principal preparation programs to build stronger curricula (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Orr,

2010; Young, 2015). While efforts to improve principal preparation programs are ongoing, principals' needs are continuously changing. Seminal issues such as the global pandemic, substantial societal disagreements and confusion, policy changes, and social disruptions have created evolving job expectations for principals.

As previously stated, the COVID-19 pandemic led to greatly heightened expectations that principals should become digital instructional leaders. Because of the emotional stress and trauma caused by the pandemic, principals were required to manage the wellness of all personnel in their schools.

Determining effective curricula, meaningful clinical practices, and useful internship requirements are among the most important areas for collaboration.

Through frequent and ongoing collaboration, universities can offer a curriculum and set of clinical practices that address the current challenges principals face as a result of changes in their roles caused by the pandemic and other recent changes. Similarly, university research findings can be applied to school districts to improve their support for district professional development.

This study aimed to better understand the changes in principalship caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and other challenges. In cooperation with the relevant university faculties, school districts can use this knowledge to provide more robust support and development to principals. This study answers the following three research questions:

(1) What are the long-term changes in the way principals lead schools because of recent challenges (especially the COVID-19 pandemic)?

(2) What do principals perceive as the current support required to effectively lead schools in a post-pandemic environment?

(3) What are principals' perceptions of changes in universities' curricula for preparing principals?

Theoretical Framework

As universities and school districts strive to meaningfully develop and support principals, the dynamics of the principalship and the support required elevate the obligation to employ fundamental theories, such as adult learning. The stakes are simply too high and the needs too great to fall short of meeting the needs of principals.

Adult learning theory provides the theoretical underpinnings of this study's recommendations. Simply put, principals' continuous development must be supported effectively and efficiently. Knowles et al. (2005) developed six widely known assumptions or principles of andragogy: (1) adults need to know why they must learn something, (2) adults need to feel responsible for their own learning, (3) adults have vast life experiences to shape their learning, (4) adults learn best when moving from one developmental stage to the next, (5) adults learn best with problem-based learning geared toward development and practical skills, and (6) adults are internally motivated.

We applied these theoretical concepts to our recommendations and implications for practice and collaboration between P-12 school district personnel and universities.

This study adopted Norton's conceptual framework of the principal as an advocate for continuous visionary change (Norton, 2015). Norton offered principals a way to think, act differently, and succeed as visionary collaborators in this dynamic milieu rather than viewing inevitable changes as mere bystanders.

Principals do not need to be overwhelmed when dealing with rapidly evolving changes.

Literature Review

Determining the requirements for current and aspiring principals to succeed in a post-pandemic environment requires a review of literature on changes that have taken place in principals' education and adult learning. Recent developments regarding changes in principalship, the effectiveness of principals, leadership development, and adult learning theory support this study.

Development in the principalship

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the definition and job description of school principals. Nearly 40 years ago, Wynn and Guditus (1984) noted that organizations are continually evolving, and that schools and other educational institutions are no exception. More than 25 years ago, principals reported a dynamic set of job responsibilities that included collaborative decision-making, responding to changing and conflicting community demands, and taking on new and unfamiliar roles (Portin et al., 1998).

In a manuscript on changes in urban principalship, Portin (2000) identified "new patterns of management, curricular innovations, increased student testing, accountability measures, and market forces" that contributed to a "role that is complex, imbued with conflict, and far reaching" (pp. 493–494).

Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) wrote that principals faced multiple challenges, being required to serve as "educational visionaries, change agents, instructional leaders, curriculum and assessment experts, budget analysts, facility managers, special program administrators, and community builders" (p. 6). In 2014, Alvoid and Black observed "that the modern-day principal has transformed into something that would be almost unrecognizable

of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s” (as cited in Norton 2015, p. 1).

The challenges that principals face in the post-pandemic workplace continue to evolve, reflecting the need for them to advocate for continuous visionary change.

Recent studies (Pollock, 2020; Westberry et al., 2021) have chronicled the effects of current developments in the principalship that have resulted from the pandemic. The four key themes identified in this study, namely deep knowledge of technology, social-emotional support, understanding of school operations, and flexibility, align with the findings of Pollock (2020) and Westberry et al. (2021).

Pollock (2020) stated that the pandemic has impacted principals’ work in two ways: it has altered the design of safe schooling, setting the context for future schooling, and it has expanded the role of the principal as an instructional leader in the virtual environment. As with the participants in this study, the participating principals in Pollock’s (2020) study expressed a need for deep knowledge of technology and a more in-depth understanding of school operations to be effective in leading both traditional and virtual schools.

Principals’ effectiveness

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, principals were expected to be knowledgeable leaders who provide support for their staff and their communities. These expectations have greatly expanded because of the pandemic. Principals are now assumed to be experts in many areas for which they have not received adequate preparation.

To be successful in the current educational environment, principals must continuously develop their leadership skills to

make decisions that promote organizational goals, support teacher development, and respond effectively to complex challenges. Hence, the application of adult learning to this context offers the opportunity to support principals’ development most efficiently.

Research on principals’ effectiveness emphasizes the multiple roles school leaders must assume. According to Matthews and Crow (2010), principals play the following significant roles: learners, culture builders, advocates, leaders, mentors, supervisors, managers, and politicians.

Griöm et al. (2021) identified four responsibilities principals must address to yield positive student and teacher outcomes: engage in instructionally focused interactions with teachers, build a positive school climate, facilitate collaboration and professional learning communities, and effectively managing personnel. Other studies on leadership behaviors have identified the importance of setting direction, developing people, distributing leadership and decision-making, and managing change using data to monitor school and student progress and support ongoing improvement efforts (Leithwood & Louis, 2012).

Norton’s (2015) concept of the visionary principal as a change agent provides a framework for understanding the challenges of today’s workplace and identifying the knowledge and skills required for the future. As this concept emphasizes, effective principals must be comfortable with ambiguity and role conflicts. Principals must offer stability while selectively shaping and embracing visionary changes. They must have the flexibility to recalibrate their work while acknowledging the need for steadiness and employ changing skillsets that collaboratively lead to the necessary growth.

Leadership development

According to Scott and Webber (2008), the role of principals encompasses “diverse duties and expectations, ranging from those of instructional leaders to financial managers to policy developers, decision makers, staff mediators and negotiators, and marketers” (p. 765). Principals are responsible for the overall operational and instructional leadership of schools and require a specialized set of skills to lead effectively. However, principals continue to lack the necessary support and professional development they need, especially compared with teachers (Rodriguez et al., 2021).

Recognizing the importance of principal leadership development, several researchers have conducted studies exploring this complex phenomenon to provide practical recommendations (Daniëls et al., 2019; Maxfield & Flumerfelt, 2009; Scott & Webber, 2008; Tingle et al., 2017). To support and retain principals, district leaders and principal preparation programs should be based on a sound understanding of leadership theories, an understanding of management and change, and a repertoire of skills acquired from school-based experiences. Effective leadership development is characterized by the ability to create and implement a vision while using practical knowledge and skills.

Adult learning theory

As leadership development is a form of adult learning that supports administrators, teachers, and students, the theoretical foundation of this study was drawn from adult learning theories, in which several models of instructional supervision have been proposed (Zepeda et al., 2014). These models acknowledge that adult learners differ significantly from child learners in their needs, motivations, learning processes, and learning contexts in relation to their unique learning styles.

One theory that has become dominant over the last three decades is that principal leadership development can be viewed through the lens of transformative learning. Unlike informational learning, which emphasizes the acquisition of knowledge and skills, transformative learning involves developing the cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal capacities required to cope with the complexities of changing workplaces (Joo & Kim, 2016).

Thus, the outcomes of transformative learning are directly connected to actual changes in action at both individual and organizational levels. Transformative learning facilitates leaders by enhancing their capacity to make authentic changes in their organizational lives.

Methods

This exploratory qualitative study aimed to understand the changing principalship and to identify the current support needed by P-12 principals in light of changing demographics, transience, emerging technologies, major societal changes, and a worldwide pandemic. The study was guided by three research questions designed to encourage dialogue about the current needs of sitting principals regarding their changing needs.

Purposeful sampling was used to select participants because it was critical that participants met specific criteria, that is, they had to be sitting principals with at least three consecutive years of service experience. We focused on schools that did not receive support from a large, well-funded district administration; therefore, we decided to focus on low-wealth districts/school campuses as determined by state equalization funding programs (districts receiving additional state

support owing to low property tax values per student). Purposeful sampling ensured that the selected participants held the knowledge required for this study and could share firsthand experiences of the support needed by principals to be effective in leading schools in the current environment.

Invitations to participate were emailed to principals of qualified schools in Tennessee and Georgia. Two principals were selected to participate at each school level: elementary, middle, and high. Virtual interviews were conducted between one team member and one participant. The interviews were video-recorded.

Instrumentation

We developed interview questions to address the three research questions that guided the study. A panel of sitting principals reviewed the interview questions for clarity and connection to the research questions and revised the final interview protocol (Appendix) accordingly.

Data analysis

To analyze the data, we transcribed the interviews using Temi.com. We reviewed the transcripts and made corrections. We then used

NVivo 12 (2018) qualitative data analysis software to code the data for each transcript. In addition, each researcher individually reviewed and coded all the interviews. We then cross-checked the codes by comparing the NVivo 12 (2018) codes with our individual code structures to support validity. We employed thematic analysis to identify patterns in the data and develop themes. The findings were organized into themes to address the research questions.

Findings and Emergent Themes

We interviewed six principals from Georgia and Tennessee; they had between 4 and 14 years of experience as school principals. Three of the principals were men and three were women; four were classified as White and two as Black. All six were leaders in schools that were identified as having low wealth according to the funding formula for their respective states (received additional state funding because of the low tax digest value per student). We examined the interview data to identify sitting principals' current needs in relation to leading schools in an effective manner. Five major themes emerged, as shown in Table 1. Aspects of these themes overlapped, providing data relevant to more than one research question.

Table 1

Top Five Themes

Theme	Number of Times Mentioned
Deep knowledge of technology	33
Social-emotional support (well-being)	29
School operations	21
Collaboration and teamwork	19
Flexibility	13

Deep knowledge of technology

Recent societal disruptions and disagreements, especially following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, had an extensive and permanent impact on school operations. School closures because of the pandemic required principals to adjust to leading the delivery of face-to-face, virtual, and hybrid instruction simultaneously, shifting from being instructional leaders in a face-to-face environment to the leadership of schools in a virtual environment.

Westberry et al. (2021) defined virtual leadership as the principle of guiding faculty and students that takes place entirely online,

where there is no face-to-face interaction. Unsurprisingly, all participants agreed that the technological competence and skills required to operate a virtual school were significantly greater than those required to run a traditional school. One participant acknowledged this added responsibility: “I really did lead two schools. I led a virtual and a face-to-face school.” Another participant responded that they needed to learn “how to juggle virtual and face-to-face and just navigating real-time virtual platforms.”

Another participant shared similar thoughts about virtual leadership:

I think I have had to learn to become a virtual principal. An example would be because a large portion of my students, and sometimes the entire school, was doing what we referred to as distance learning, and there was no face-to-face [instruction].

This major change in thinking required principals to utilize technological knowledge. Five of the six participants shared their thoughts about the need for principals, as virtual leaders, to have a deep and varied knowledge of technology to lead their schools effectively. Consider, for example, this comment:

Technology: It challenged all of us. I remember this time last year; we were conducting summer training with our staff. You know, we were training on how to set up your Canvas page or Canvas learning management system page, and how to set up your Microsoft Teams page to be student- and parent-friendly. So, it challenged me. I had to force myself. If I am going to require my staff to learn these things, I will also have to do so. So, it's hard. It challenged me to really step up my game in terms of how to use [the] Canvas learning management system.

The principals realized that to be effective in leading staff, students, and community members in both virtual and face-to-face instruction environments, they needed an in-depth knowledge and understanding of technology and various applications.

Social-emotional support

The participants identified that current societal challenges drastically changed the way students, staff, and communities interact with one another. Social-emotional support was the second theme that emerged from the interview data. All six participants noted the need to

support principals' efforts to provide much-needed social and emotional well-being for teachers and students, as exemplified by the following comments:

I know that mental health capacity is what I needed. I had to brush up on [social-emotional support and development] to provide support for my community. I know that's what our teachers needed from each other, and that's what the students needed from the teachers. Therefore, these needs had to be tailored to the community.

Principals struggle to support teachers and students in addressing the mental health issues they face. The participants were aware of their lack of training and resources in this area and the need for further development and resources to address the social, emotional, and well-being issues that teachers and students experience in schools.

School operations

The participants viewed managing school operations, defined as the planning and organization of school resources, as one of their major responsibilities that had recently expanded. All six participants noted the need for principals to be skilled in conducting school operations, citing that they were responsible for two schools: a face-to-face and a virtual school. They needed to devote more time and attention to operational issues such as safety, scheduling, sanitation, and lunch supervision. This is evident from the following observation.

I had to change everything about how I scheduled a building to think about safety and interactions, and even if the pandemic is going away, COVID will be there. However, we still need to be mindful of its safety. I do not think that we need to ever really shy away from thinking of safety and sanitation and all that because that will help keep our community healthy.

Another participant echoed the increase in operational responsibilities that principals had to assume:

You know, on some days, we had to contact a trace, which was sometimes difficult. One day, I had to track down 40-something kids and that's difficult, especially in a school that has a seven-period day, and kids are moving about. And you know, there were days that stopped us from serving as administrators [because] we had to do that. The main thing, I guess, is that our supervision time greatly increased because [of] the reduced number of students in the cafeteria. We added two lunch periods. Therefore, we had lunch every day from 11:15 am to 1:45 pm. We did not allow students to congregate at any location.

The majority of participants believed that their operational responsibilities have increased dramatically in recent times. The responsibility of providing for the safety and well-being of staff and students, with the added challenges of operating both virtual and traditional schools, changed the way principals did their jobs. Their focus shifted from instructional to operational leadership at a level that they were reportedly ill-prepared to manage.

Collaboration and teamwork

Collaboration and teamwork have emerged as areas where principals require distinct types of support. The participants unanimously expressed that collaboration with colleagues had recently increased and was a valuable and necessary measure for making effective decisions for leading their schools. Collaboration and teamwork encompass the need for principals to work closely and cooperatively with colleagues to address job-related issues.

This collaboration involves both formal and informal meetings with other principals, during which they can listen to and learn from each other. For example, one participant stated, "I think the most beneficial part of that is just collaborating with other principals, just getting in the same room with other people that are doing what you are doing and learning from their experiences." Five of the six participants expressed this sentiment.

One participant stated:

I really saw the value of collaboration and not just collaboration with leaders in my own district, but collaboration with leaders in other districts; we all learn from each other. The collaboration multiplied when the pandemic shut us down because we went from monthly collaboration as system-level leadership to weekly collaboration, ensuring that we made the right decisions that were best informed for our own region.

Furthermore, the participants reported that they found collaboration with colleagues highly beneficial for problem solving and managing their work. For example, one participant commented that collaboration with colleagues represented the best professional support available to principals:

You can attend class and go through programs, and you will always take back useful information. However, nothing will ever replace being around a table or virtually with people who are doing what you are doing in real time and finding solutions to the problems that you are struggling with.

Although the principals had previously recognized the value of collaboration with their colleagues, they felt the need to engage in it

more frequently because of the growing complexity of their responsibilities.

Flexibility

The final theme that emerged from the data is flexibility. This theme captures participants' beliefs about public education's one-size-fits-all approach to teaching and learning, and the rigid way in which public schools typically operate. Participants expressed concern about the lack of flexibility in the existing structures in public education. Four of the six participants mentioned this theme, with a total of 13 occurrences across the individual interviews.

One participant felt that there were multiple reasons why alternatives to public schools had begun flourishing and stated:

I think the reason we have so many options in education now is because there are too many people willing or not willing to evolve and change the way we do education. They want to retain what they have experienced in school. Hold on to the way their school, their principal, and their mentor [did it]. It was difficult to put the kids back in straight, traditional rows ... in school because that was the only way we could spread them out.

Another participant shared concerns about the need for flexibility in public schools:

I could be wrong with this statement. However, on March 13, when schools closed for the day, I said that public education had just changed, as we knew it. That day felt heavy. It's like Pandora's box. So, I believe it has been opened, and I do not think we will ever put the lid on it. I think public education has changed in some ways forever post pandemic. Therefore, we believe that there is a need to change. Preparation involves thinking through

flexibility, how public education must adjust and adapt, and providing flexibility for families. You know, I really feel as if we do not do that important work in public education, that we are going to get farmed out slowly. I think it will be farmed out to all these charter schools to provide flexibility.

Overall, the principals recognized that to remain competitive and viable, public schools must become more flexible in their structures and offer more options for the students and parents they serve. Contemporary issues require public schools to abandon their rigid approach and tailor their offerings and communication strategies to students, teachers, and parents, thus opening a door that cannot or should not be closed.

Implications for Practice

This study revealed that principals' job duties and requisite skills continue to change significantly. The complexity and depth of these emerging needs require that P-12 school district personnel and principal preparation program providers review and amend their strategies, curricula, and structures to remain relevant and thereby meet principals' current requirements in an effective manner.

University preparation program faculties should robustly review the principal certification curriculum and should consider creating a curricular advisory team comprising professors and active principals who meet at least twice a year to discuss the strengths of the preparation program as well as select areas for improvement in terms of the curriculum and other program aspects. Using an active curricular advisory council will bridge the gap between the university and P-12 practitioners and will ensure that curricula are not developed in isolation solely by university faculties. Moreover, an active curricular advisory council

will help to ensure that university curricula and clinical experiences reflect the current realities of the principalship (Horner & Jordan, 2020).

Another theme that emerged from the data was the need to support principals by providing vital social and emotional well-being support for teachers and students. The principal preparation program faculty should develop course assignments that include interviews and collaboration with community partners such as mental health professionals, counselors, psychologists, and social workers.

District personnel should recognize the importance of counselors and social workers and develop resources and information that can be made available to school principals on an as-needed basis. Instructional units developed cooperatively with university school counseling faculty and K-12 district counselors should be added to the principal certification courses.

Regarding other ways for university faculties to adjust their curricula to remain relevant to the current needs of principals, sitting principals should frequently be included as guest speakers and discussion collaborators. Furthermore, a three-credit course dedicated to “emerging issues and current trends” could be created, which would focus on up-to-date information and needed support for current principals. Active principals should play a significant role in developing course content.

Principals reported the need to increase their skills in managing school operations, citing the fact that they are now responsible for face-to-face and virtual schools. An effective strategy for enhancing principals’ abilities to prepare for and manage issues related to school operations is to frequently employ simulations and case studies that emphasize multiple pathways for managing different problems and situations. Additionally, in university preparation programs, operational issues, such

as schedules and supervision, should be considered from a systems perspective.

Furthermore, courses that teach instructional leadership should include an equal focus on virtual and non-virtual instructional leadership. Specifically, principal preparation programs should consider developing explicit technological competencies for principal candidates to ensure virtual instructional leadership skills and operational efficiency. This recommendation can be implemented as part of university curricula, in partnership with the school district personnel.

Finally, the theme of collaboration and teamwork emerged as an area in which the principals required support. The participants unanimously expressed the value of collaborating with their colleagues. Principal preparation program personnel should strive for rich clinical experiences that require support, collaboration, and interaction between principal candidates and sitting school principals.

Conclusion

The chaos and crisis occasioned by the recent global pandemic and other current societal unrest have accelerated changes and permanently influenced the responsibilities of the principalship. The significant reframing of the principalship necessitates that leadership preparation providers and P-12 districts refocus their efforts.

The depth of the changes to the principalship lead us to believe that collaboration and partnership between university providers and P-12 school systems, which have always been desirable, has now become essential. For universities to continue as relevant primary sources of leadership certification, the development of relevant curricula through structured and frequent collaboration with working principals is required. University program faculty must

exhibit elevated levels of flexibility, including dedicating program credit hours to emerging issues in the principalship.

The emerging requirements for principals include factors related to virtual instructional leadership, specific technological competencies, process, and management competencies, leveraging and accessing community resources, helping others cope with emotions, problem solving, conflict resolution, exhibiting flexibility in increasingly ambiguous

contexts, and building student self-efficacy. P-12 district personnel and university faculty should consider this listing of emerging needs and tailor support to school leaders. At this time of desperate need for support, principals deserve the best support that universities and P-12 school districts can provide. By viewing today's social disorder as an opportunity, universities and P-12 school districts can collaboratively build a more meaningful system of support for principals to enhance the success of all students.

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Appendix

Interview Protocol

The following questions guided the interview process:

1. What do you know now (post pandemic) about leading a school that you wished you knew before COVID-19?
2. Did the pandemic require you to learn or utilize new skills to perform your duties? If so, which skills? Provide examples.
3. In reflecting on your leadership practices, did the global pandemic impact any of your practices to the extent that you relied more on certain practices than others? (In decision-making, problem-solving, or other areas.) If so, please explain.
4. How did the pandemic change your daily work requirements?
5. How has your job changed in the past year or two?
6. What current supports do principals need to effectively lead schools?
7. What changes do university preparation programs need to make in response to this pandemic?
8. What skills/knowledge do you currently need to lead effectively that you did not get in your leadership preparation program?
9. Describe the professional support structures you use to stay abreast of changes in principalship?
10. What do you believe may help inform the future professional development of school leaders to lead schools effectively post pandemic?
11. How can university preparation programs assist in developing both current and pre-service principals post pandemic?
12. Is there anything else you would like to add before we end?