Leading Urban Schools: Narratives of Leadership Trainees and Their Mentors

Raji Swaminathan

Abstract: This paper draws from a larger qualitative study on building leadership capacity in urban schools. This paper focuses on the experiences of leadership or administrative trainees from the New Leaders program and their mentors on the experiences of being ‘in the field.’ The research shows that trainees and mentors focus on different skill sets with trainees concentrating on personal leadership qualities while mentors’ focus on context and on working with the community. Trainees see their internship as a preparation for the future while mentors see trainees as critical to their current leadership teams. The research reveals that it is important for such programs to consider institutional growth in tandem with personal growth to benefit both the individual and the school where they are placed.

Introduction

Leadership development is high priority across the nation as a means to improve public school education. Educational administration programs are challenged to ensure that principals would be able to restructure school settings, learn new roles, and serve as catalysts for change (Firestone, Schorr & Monfils, 2004). Not only must school leaders perform what Elmore (2000) calls "the ritualistic tasks of organizing, budgeting, managing, and dealing with disruptions inside and outside the system" (p.5-6), today's instructional leader must be able to coach, teach, and develop the teachers in their schools.

Several initiatives in the private or non-profit sector have begun recruiting, training and supporting urban public school leaders as a way to meet the shortage and crisis in school leadership. One such program, the New Leaders for New Schools, was initiated in the Midwest Urban School District in 2006 and includes a residency program. Residency programs allow trainees to learn ‘in situ’ and include mentoring by a model principal as well as support from an outside coach. Although such residency programs are widely regarded as valuable leadership preparation, we know little about the experiences of trainees and even less about how mentors in schools view the training programs and the experience of mentoring the participants. By examining both the mentors and the trainees perspectives, we can learn what experienced leaders view as important in training and what novices find most useful. This paper will report the results of a qualitative study of leadership experiences in urban schools.

Research Questions

The research questions driving this study are:
1) What are leadership trainees’ experiences of ‘residency’ or ‘field based internships’ at urban public high schools?
2) What are principals’ or mentors’ experiences of mentoring or training assistant principals during ‘residency’ at their schools?
3) What do the narratives of trainees and their mentors tell us about the best practices, challenges, and limitations of leadership training and preparation?

**Methodology**

A qualitative interview method (Bogdan & Biklen, 2005) was used for this study. Altogether 6 trainees and 6 mentors were interviewed. Data were gathered through two broad strands of inquiry – a systematic observation of the leadership team meetings, in-depth narrative interviews with trainees and mentors. Data were analyzed in stages (Le Compte, 1999), beginning with an item level analysis (create taxonomies) followed by pattern level analysis (create linkages between items) and then a structural level of analysis (organize relationships among patterns into structures).

**Overview of the Research Study**

This study grew out of a larger study on leadership capacity building in urban schools. I was part of a collaborative project which engaged fourteen high schools and five school districts along with three universities. Each university worked with one or two school districts. Each faculty member worked with particular schools. We attended formal leadership meetings where discussions pertaining to developing leadership capacity for student achievement were predominant. We also attended other formal and informal meetings comprising teacher leaders and other university the faculty worked with particular schools. We interviewed teacher leaders and members of the leadership team including principals and assistant principals. While our focus was on leadership capacity building, other questions and concerns relating to nurturing leadership began to surface. One of these involved mentoring trainees from the New Leaders program. This paper emerged from the concerns and perspectives of trainees and their mentors.

**Results**

Data from this study revealed some commonalities in the perspectives of trainees and mentors in terms of concerns. They also revealed tensions between their perspectives along the themes of responsibility, accountability and trust. Both trainees and their mentors were concerned with the development of quality leaders in school settings. However, what the trainees considered crucial for leadership development was different from the skill set that mentors considered important. For example, trainees considered being exposed to several situations important while mentors wanted trainees to be exposed to the same situation several different times to understand the changes in context better. Mentors wanted trainees to focus on discipline and to shadow several different administrators in order to get a wider picture of the different ways in which similar situations could be interpreted and handled. Mentors considered learning how to bring together a diverse group of people together around issues as an important skill to learn for leadership trainees. Ultimately, mentors saw leadership as a process intimately tied to the context while trainees saw leadership as a set of personal and professional skills that was not necessarily tied to context.
**New Leaders / Trainees’ perspectives of field experiences**

Almost all the trainees valued their field experiences and thought they learned a great deal during their internship and from their mentors, coaches from being in the field. One trainee described her typical day in the field that started with her walking the halls and ushering the students into their classes. She then walked through the classrooms, dealing with some overt policy issues such as no wearing of hats. She then went into her office, tackled email, and then answered phone calls from parents. With regard to priorities, she named her first priority as getting students back into the classroom after dealing with discipline issues. Her second priority was working with parents and third, working with teachers.

Trainees considered the three most important skills and attitudes they considered while in the field were – learning to be reflective, not reactive; learning to be a confident servant, and third, learning to listen not merely hear. These skills, in their view were transferable skills to any situation. Only one trainee wrote a journal every night on her observations of how her mentor handled the day to day events in the school and outside of it. In her view, this was crucial because it helped her to critique what she saw and reflect on how she might have handled the same situation. She also kept the journal for use in the future. In her words, “I might run into the same situation and think, oh, yes, that happened there and I wonder how my mentor handled it. I would go back to the journal and take a look.”

Almost all trainees thought that where they were placed was less important than the skills they learned from watching the mentors. This was partly because several trainees were surprised by their placement over which they had little choice. One trainee expected to be in a school with a bilingual program while another had expected to be in an elementary school, given her area of experience and expertise.

Many of the trainees pointed out that the process was mysterious and perhaps flawed. In one trainee’s words,

> The main corporate office did the pairing up. I would have worked anywhere but the process is not transparent. I would have expected them to put me in a bilingual school since I am bilingual and that is my future goal as well. For some reason, they put me here. I have enjoyed my time here, though.

In the same vein, mentors at schools also discussed the problematic nature of not being given a choice. In their view, they would have preferred to have participated in the selection process. Not being given a choice was perceived as not having a voice or say in what went on at their school sites. This led to a feeling of disempowerment on their part as they likened the decisions to an ‘invisible hand.’ One of the mentors put it in this way,

> There is this big invisible hand that seems to decide who goes where and whom we should get here. I would have liked to have had a say in who I had here. Also, no one has asked us so far what we get out of this, as an institution and as individuals, or even what do the students at the school get out of this. Do these adults in the building help the school climate or not? This is the real question and one that gets swept under the rug.

> It is clear from these conversations that neither the mentors nor the trainees had any real say in where they were placed. The trainees had little idea whether or not they would be placed at the same school for an additional year. As one of the trainees pointed out, since the training was intense leading to immense growth in the individual in terms of leadership, it would be beneficial to have a meeting before the placement the following year.

> Well I think that certainly I’m hoping for a meeting where the administration and I could they could ask me questions see what, get a more clear picture of my profile because the growth that an intern goes through from the beginning of the year to now is so
monumental that it would be better served when deciding where to go if they have a meeting. I’m sure they will, they just haven’t told me yet.

Interns like the interviewee were mentally always carrying a ‘backpack’ ready to move to the next placement at a moment’s notice. They were focused on growing their leadership skills and often saw their place as a temporary one at the school. They were intent on learning new skills that would benefit them in the long term. They thought about what they could ‘take away’ with them. Since most interns were of the opinion that they would not be placed at the school where they interned, they paid attention to learning skill sets that were transferable rather than focusing on the context of the school where they were currently placed.

While the interns felt uncomfortable with not knowing where they would be placed the following year, the same uncertainty left the mentors feeling unsettled. They raised questions regarding responsibility and accountability. In addition, the mentors noted that no evaluation was conducted to examine the impact of resident trainees in school settings.

**Mentors’ perspectives of New Leaders**

In the arena of responsibility and community building, the administrative trainees and mentors experienced a degree of tension. It became clear from the interviews that while administrative trainees got a great deal out of the internship program in terms of personal growth, the mentors were less than enthusiastic about the benefits of the program for the institution. Part of the reason for this difference in perception was that the trainees focused on ‘getting ready’ to be tomorrow’s leaders in schools. The mentors, on the other hand, were already in schools facing crises everyday where they looked to the trainees to lend a hand wherever necessary. A number of factors created the tension. Almost all the factors were cast in the rhetoric of ‘time.’ While the trainees thought they were making great use of their time, mentors thought that the trainees did not have enough time in the field. Related to this were mentors’ perceptions of New Leaders’ commitment and loyalty to the school.

In terms of time, the trainees were in a program that had intense coaching and mentoring in addition to courses and training for which they were absent from the school. While the trainees valued this time away in order to learn both in the field and from their peers, their absences were seen as disruptions to the life of the school by the mentors who felt they could not rely on them for the day to day issues that populated a school. One of the mentors confided that she did not think that the New Leaders were getting adequate exposure to issues of leadership in the school since they were frequently absent. She questioned their understanding of day to day issues and was of the opinion that they did not get a good ‘feel’ for the school. In her words,

> I am not a strong supporter of New Leaders. I don’t feel that they get a good feel of what’s going on and they are gone all the time. If they are at a school where they are totally extra then you would be (getting lots out of it) which I’m not quite understanding, then you are using them as if they are not there. So it does not really matter if they are not there. But in reality if you want somebody to be trained we have to take responsibility for something and own it and this year I am not feeling an ownership at all from my New Leaders. As much as they feel they are owning it, they are not.

Several mentors questioned the ownership or sense of belonging that trainees felt towards the school in which they were placed. They thought that community building was one of the key points of learning to lead and that the trainees were not in a position where they could learn that skill. One of the mentors for example said,
And not feeling that ownership is where, and even when something as small as wearing a different High School’s shirt on Friday. Now that is just to me not getting it. I’m not going there with that person but why would you wear another shirt when our Fridays the day everybody wears their red and black or their school shirt, why would you wear another school’s shirt. That is sending a signal out there. Even our coaches who coach for other schools don’t wear their other schools shirt because you are building community here at this school.

Another mentor also mentioned the lack of a sense of belonging on the part of the trainees and how they participated in the school’s overall activities.

To me it’s symbolic that they have so little attachment, it’s like this is just my stepping stone let me get on with my life. Now they would probably disagree and this is probably a very strong comment. But it’s a true comment and this year I forget they are here. The feeling that there was a lack of true commitment led to a feeling of resentments among mentors who felt that they had been shortchanged with regard to the number of leaders on their team. Instead of being able to rely on the New Leaders, they had to do what they thought of as ‘double duty.’ The first duty was to mentor and the second was to pick up the slack for the New Leaders at the school.

One of the most distinct differences between the trainees’ perspectives and the mentors’ perspectives was around what it meant to be a leader. While trainees focused on attributes of personal growth, the mentors thought that key aspects of leadership had to do with outreach and learning to be a manager. This meant that leaders had to learn to negotiate and create relationships with the neighborhood, with the community outside of the immediate school grounds. They had to have both competence and a philosophy that aligned with their belief system. Finally, mentors put “relentless commitment” as the foremost quality required in leaders.

Conclusion

This study revealed that the differences between the perspectives of the administrative trainees and the mentors centered on different definitions of leadership. Administrative trainees focused on their personal growth independent of the organizational structure while mentors viewed the growth of the individual in the context of the institution as important. Trainees’ were committed to the program of leadership preparation while mentors (principals and assistant principals) were focused on the school and the needs of the school. Mentors’ views of the skills and knowledge required by leaders were different from the trainees’ views. The differences were in part due to the structure of the program where trainees were often absent from the school setting, leading trainees to try to develop transferable skill sets. The absences led mentors to feel less than connected to their trainees. They also thought that personal growth and institutional growth needed to take place in tandem and that one should not be at the expense of the other. The study points to the need for better reflection and organization of the program so that both the individuals and the institutions benefit, grow and learn from each other.

Implications of the applications to practice & theory

The implications for practice and theory in the field of leadership preparation are significant. The data tell us what is important about residency experiences and what administrative trainees learn from such experiences. They tell us that leadership requires an exploration of how context defines the performance requirements and practice of leadership.
Finally, the data point to the importance of examining Wenger’s theory of a community of practice (1998) for leadership preparation programs. According to Wenger, within organizations, a community of practice will reflect a shared learning that benefits the enterprise as well as the social relations.

References


Raji Swaminathan
Associate Professor, UWM School of Education,
Department of Educational Policy & Community Studies, Enderis Hall
Phone: 414-229-5652; Fax: 414-229-3200,
swaminar@uwm.edu

Presented at the Midwest Research-to Practice Conference in Adult, Continuing, and Community Education, Michigan State University, September 26-28, 2010.