STRENGTHENING RESEARCH ON THE PREPARATION OF SCHOOL LEADERS

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For much of the last quarter century, academics and practitioners have been engaged in an unbroken quest to understand the school improvement algorithm (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). That is, there have been ongoing efforts, sometimes systematic and often ad hoc, to isolate the variables in the school performance equation and to understand how they work, both as individual components and as parts of the system of schooling. Across this time, investigators have paid special attention to conditions in schools that help explain the dramatic overrepresentation of selected groups of youngsters in the underperforming and failing categories of the school success taxonomy (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

From this work, we have discovered a good deal about how schools work to promote, or fail to promote, student achievement. For example, we know that quality instruction (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott & Wilkinson, 1985; Ferguson & Ladd, 1996) and opportunity to learn (time, content, and success rate) (Cooley & Leinhardt, 1980; Denham & Lieberman, 1980) explain a good deal of student performance. In a similar vein, we have learned that robust connections between home and school focusing on academic mission (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990; Rowe, 1995) and thoughtful professional development in the context of communities of practice (Elmore, 1996; Little & McLaughlin, 1993; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999) are important links in the school improvement chain.

Research throughout the last quarter century in education has also underscored leadership as a critical theme in the school improvement narrative. Indeed, evidence from nearly every realm of investigation beginning with effective schools studies (Purkey & Smith, 1983) through the most recent work on comprehensive school reform (Copland, 2003; Smylie, Wenzel, & Fendt, 2003) confirms leadership as an explanatory variable in schools where all students meet ambitious achievement targets.

As is often the case, enhanced recognition has been accompanied by increased scrutiny. And, not unexpectedly, the spotlight has revealed both positive attributes and flaws in how we think about and practice leadership in schools. For example, at the same time that some researchers were uncovering the importance of learning–centered work for principals and superintendents (see Murphy, 1990a; Murphy & Hallinger, 1986), other analysts were documenting that leadership in schools, as commonly enacted, had little to do with education— that the calculus of leadership in schools was a composite of management, politics, and organization (Bates, 1984; Evans, 1991).

As understanding of leadership in the work of school reform began to deepen, more and more attention has been directed to the qualifications of the women and men who occupy leadership roles in schools. Consequently, considerable interest has been devoted to the preparation of those leaders. Yet a careful review of the body of work in this area reveals that the great bulk of the scholarship falls into one of two categories—advocacy-based perspectives or conceptual analysis. Theoretical frameworks and empirical studies are much more difficult to locate. We attend to these issues in this review. Specifically, we describe what is known about the preparation function from research studies and we outline an agenda for strengthening research on the preparation of school administrators.

Findings about Research and Preparation Programs

In 2004 Murphy and Vriesenga completed an investigation on the state of research on preparation programs in school administration. The seven central findings from that analysis of research published in the leading journals in school administration with a long publishing history—*EAQ*, *JEA*, *JSL*, *Planning and Changing* – are discussed in the following paragraphs.

1. *There is not an overabundance of scholarship in the area of administrator preparation.* At least when we focus on the leading journals in school leadership, it is clear that   descriptions and analyses of preparation programs do not occupy much space in these outlets. Only 8% of the 2000 plus articles in these journals from 1975 to 2002 dealt with preservice training programs. Given the applied nature of the profession and the centrality of preparatory activities to departments of educational leadership, the fact that serious academic work on preservice training remains a minor element in the school administration scholarship mosaic is as surprising as it is disappointing.

2. *Work in entire domains of administrator preparation is conspicuous by its absence.* While in no area of administrator preparation is there a surfeit of work, at least on some topics an initial body of literature is developing. On the other hand, very little study has been directed toward entire sections of the preparatory landscape. Specifically, we know very little about issues ranging from how we recruit and select students, instruct them in our programs, and monitor and assess their progress. Organizational life inside programs is hardly touched upon in the research literature. We also learn remarkably little from the journals about the faculty members who develop and operate these programs. In particular, there is almost no empirical evidence on the education of those who educate prospective school leaders.

3. *The contours of school leadership are only weakly shaped by empirical evidence on preparation programs.* Slightly less than 3% [56] of the 2000 plus articles published between 1975 and 2002 in the leading journals in our field are empirically anchored investigations on administrator preparation. While we seem to know about this topic, as evidenced in the abundance of writing and professing in the area, very little of our understanding has been forged on the empirical anvil. While it is appropriate for the field to incorporate multiple ways of knowing about the preparation experience, the very limited attention devoted to empirical studies remains a serious problem.

4. *The amount of scholarship devoted to administrator preparation is expanding.* Between 1975 and 1990, approximately 3% of the articles in the leading journals addressed administrator preservice training. Since that time, over 11% of the articles have attended to training issues. During the earlier time period, less than 1% of journal space was devoted to empirical work on preparation programs. Since 1990, nearly 4% of the articles in the four leading journals in our field have been given over to empirical studies of administrator preservice training. Concomitantly, individual faculty have become scholars of specific areas within preparation programs, conducting critical and empirical investigations on the topic at hand (see, for example, the extended work of Barnett, Bascom, and Norris in the area of student cohorts [also Kochan and her colleagues]; Daresh on clinical work; and McCarthy and her research team on faculty issues).

5. *The methodological scaffolding supporting empirical studies has been expanded, yet it is not clear that quality has been greatly enhanced.* When one steps back and examines the full landscape of empirical work on preparation programs, it is obvious that the terrain is populated not only more densely but also by a greater variety of studies than has been the case in the field of school leadership in general in the past. In particular, incipient efforts into blended methods and the mushrooming use of naturalistic designs have significantly expanded the assortment of studies in the preparation area. Concomitantly, the importation of an entire new set of analytic strategies has enriched the architectural design undergirding preparation programs.

While in many ways the expansion of the methods portfolio has strengthened the study of the preparatory function (e.g., it has helped us see issues from multiple angles and sometimes more deeply as well), it has not made a large dent in overcoming many of the deficiencies that characterize research in school administration writ large (Boyan, 1981; Bridges, 1982; Campbell, 1979; Erickson, 1967, 1979; Lipham, 1964; McNamara, 1978; Miskel & Sandlin, 1981; Pounder, 2000; Riehl, Larson, Short, & Reitzug, 2000). In particular, the expanded portfolio has not helped produce much traction on the following issues: the ad hoc nature of the work; an over-reliance on cross-sectional

investigations; the use of limited samples; inadequately developed (or at least described) analytic frames; and a lack of depth, or a heavy focus on the surface issues of topics under investigation.

6. *Dissertation work comprises a small but not insignificant proportion of published research.* Reviewers of research in school administration in general have long noted the prominent place that doctoral students occupy in building the knowledge base in the profession. However, when the lens is directed on published articles focusing on administrator preparation in refereed journals, that conclusion is muted. Of the 56 empirical studies published in the leading journals over the last quarter century, only three can be traced directly to a dissertation. When the names of the authors of these 56 pieces were matched with dissertations, seven additional articles that could be coupled to dissertation research were located—for a total of 18%. In addition, four dissertations that were loosely linked to the content of an article published in one of the leading journals in school administration were found.

7. *There is almost no evidence of external support for empirical research on preparation programs.* For the 56 empirical studies, there is either direct or indirect reference to external funding in only three, and two of these represent very limited support. It appears that professors who engage in research on preparation programs continue to do so out of their back pockets, relying on (1) the good will of current and recent graduates to complete surveys or sit for interviews and (2) residual documents associated with preparation programs (e.g., admissions records). It is difficult to see how the profession can gain much leverage on developing systematic and programmatic work on preparation without additional support.

Strengthening Scholarship and Research on the Preparatory Function

Some General Ideas
A central recommendation of this review is that research on preparation be highlighted more fully in the profession. In this sub-section, we suggest general ideas that move us in that direction, ideas that mirror proven strategies in the other domains of school leadership, and in the area of pre-service preparation in related fields, such as teaching.
We believe that a commission report that sets the agenda for research on preparation would provide a much-needed platform for action. Commissioned work could fall to either a group that represents the profession such as the National Policy Board for Educational Administration or to highly visible extant operational initiative, such as the National Commission on the Advancement of Educational Leadership Preparation. What we envision here is a blueprint for action based on a comprehensive review of the preparation domain. Hopefully,

the analyses and suggestions contained in this report would find their way into the mix of ideas such a commission would generate.

We also believe that a *Handbook of Research on Administrator Preparation* that parallels work undertaken in teacher education could make a major contribution to strengthening research on pre-service preparation. The first volume in a possibly periodic series might be devoted as much to conducting and reporting on initial studies as it is to reviewing existing research. As was the case with the commission activity discussed above, a central dimension of the individual chapters and the summary material would be the crafting of the broad outlines for improving research in this under-investigated sphere of educational leadership.

It also seems reasonable to suggest that a journal be created that is dedicated to scholarship and research on the education of school leaders, especially to reviews of research and to empirical investigations. Teacher development has been advantaged by the presence of a number of journals dedicated to the education of teachers, including the *Journal of Teacher Education* which has been publishing useful material for over half a century, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, and *Teacher Education Quarterly*. Given the importance of preparation to the profession, a journal published under the aegis of the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) and/or the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) would seem appropriate.

Concomitantly, we maintain that the major professional organizations in school administration could be more forceful in underscoring the place of scholarship in pre-service education. We believe that our leaders should designate and sustain "leadership preparation" as one of the program areas in the call for proposals for Division A of AERA. We also suggest that regular conferences on leadership preparation, either in conjunction with NCPEA or UCEA, or as freestanding events, be planned.

A Targeted Agenda

We begin here with two observations. First, "research on educational leadership preparation programs, faculty members, and students is needed to inform deliberations about how to better prepare school leaders" (McCarthy, 1999, p.135). Second, there simply is not much research on the preparatory function in school administration and the research we do have does not seem to be sufficiently powerful to drive change efforts. As Forsyth and Willower (1999) reported in their influential *Handbook* article: "Most of the scholarly writing in preparation programs consists of broad treatments that connect reform to issues in education or society or analysis of particular reforms, often critical of the status quo and supportive of specific changes, seen as improvements" (p.18). And as Murphy and Vriesenga (2004) recently concluded, attempting to form a coherent understanding of the preparation function in school administration is

a bit like trying to create a unified artistic product by aggregating the efforts of impoverished artists working alone across a half dozen or so different forms of expression.

So the question resurfaces: Where might we begin the work to deepen our understanding of the education of school administrators and to strengthen the preparatory programs that train future school leaders? Next, we outline seven specific areas where we believe additional research could be especially beneficial in meeting these two objectives.

1. *Research on the landscape of preparation.* It is generally a wise idea to plan change based on a firm foundation of the current situation. Unfortunately, such knowledge is in very short supply in the area of administrator preparation. Not since the hallmark UCEA study conducted by Silver and Spuck and associates (Silver, 1978a, 1978b) in the mid-1970s has the field undertaken a comprehensive, large-scale investigation of the preparatory function in school administration. We suggest that it is past time to update and replicate this landmark research effort. Equally important, in the same way that the profession has approached examination of the professoriate (Campbell & Newell, 1973; McCarthy et al., 1988; McCarthy & Kuh, 1997), this comprehensive study of preparation should be conducted on a regular basis so we can track changes afoot in the education of school leaders across time.

2. *Research on the reform agenda of the last 15 years.* The recent era of ferment in school administration has resulted in the development of numerous ideas that, we are being told, are being woven together to create a new preparation tapestry (Hart & Pounder, 1999; Murphy, 1999c; Murphy, 1999d; Murphy & Forsyth, 1999). Yet there has been remarkably little empirical work on these reform issues and "few extensive studies of the impacts of these reforms exist" (Hart & Pounder, 1999, p. 146). More importantly, as McCarthy (1999) observes, "there is meager research relating recent…innovations in preparation programs to administrative success or evaluating administrators' use of knowledge gained in preparation programs" (p.134).

3. *Research on effective preparation programs* Given the long history in education of constructing improvement designs from studies of effective operations (e.g., effective schools, effective special programs for youngsters, effective curricular programs), it is interesting that studies of highly productive preparation programs should be nearly non-existent (see Murphy, 1993; Jackson & Kelley, 2002). Certainly part of the explanation centers on difficulties in developing conceptions of productive programs and in marshaling evidence of effectiveness. Still, given the prevalence and acceptance of "reputation" as a measure of effectiveness in initial work in other domains (see, for example, Fisher & Adler, 1999, in the area of effective reading programs), the research

gap here is disheartening.

4. *Research on alternative designs for preparation.* For much of the last 15 years, considerable energy has been invested in bringing market forces to systems of education throughout the U.S., to the PK-12 system and to colleges of education (Murphy, 1996; Murphy, 1999a). At the university level, this has meant that the protective walls of monopoly surrounding higher education institutions have been breached. More concretely, it has led to the enfranchisement of alternative providers for the education of school administrators. Districts (e.g., Houston), professional associations (e.g., the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association), policy entrepreneurs (e.g., the Broad Foundation), and private firms (e.g., Canter & Associates) have all begun to carve off pieces of program preparation for themselves. While we are bombarded with information about the expected benefits of these new arrangements, we know very little about them empirically. We are aware of no study that lays out in a comprehensive manner a description of these alternative designs – a picture of what the changing preparatory terrain looks like. Consequently, we know very little about the designs of these alternative models. And, of course, almost no evidence has been accumulated to support or refute claims made by advocates and opponents for shifting the locus of control over the preparation function away from universities.

While the theory in action that powers the development of alternative designs enjoys a good deal of allure, researchers should hold two cautions in mind as investigations in this area take shape. First, non-university providers held the keys to the preparation function, at least for teachers, for a good part of our history. The reasons university-anchored alternatives to district-based preparation began to dominate training have not disappeared. Stated more starkly, to date "there appears to be little, if any, evidence that suggests that we can develop good schools for all America's children by disconnecting the generation of principals and superintendents from university-based programs…" (Grogan & Andrews, 2002, p. 249). Second, students of school improvement remind us that the belief that a change in the venue of delivery in and of itself will produce different outcomes is empirically non-supportable (Murphy, 1991; Murphy & Beck, 1995).

5. *Research on program outcomes.* In 1946, Grace identified an important gap in the preparation architecture—a lack of work devoted to the examination of the effectiveness of educational programs in school administration. He held that institutions of higher education needed to be more diligent in assessing program quality and impact. The call for greater attention to program assessment was picked up in the 1950s by Wynn (1957), in the 1960s by Gregg (1960, 1969), and in the 1970s by Farquhar (1977) and Silver (1978a, 1978b). Over the last quarter century, other scholars have periodically spotlighted the need for action on this

line of work. Yet this particular patch of the research landscape in the school administration has lain fallow. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, Glasman, Cibulka, and Ashby (2002) summed up the situation somewhat charitably for the National Commission on the Advancement of Educational Leadership Preparation as follows: "Educational leadership programs have not had a strong tradition of engagement in self evaluation of their programs" (p.258).

Recent work, however, has begun to conceptualize research designs to examine the effectiveness of preparation programs (see Glasman, Cibulka, & Ashby, 2002; Orr & Kottkamp, 2003). According to these scholars, on a continuum of depth, evaluation efforts fall into one of five dimensions: (1) participant satisfaction with the program and its component elements; (2) knowledge and skill acquisition; (3) use of skills and knowledge; (4) organizational impact; and (5) performance of youngsters in the school in which a program graduate is working. An examination of the quite limited empirical work on program evaluation/program effectiveness reveals that in nearly 80% of the published studies the focus is on the process elements or the internal components of the training program (e.g., the curriculum taught or the instructional strategies employed). Almost always, assessments of these elements rely upon the perceptions of current or former students in the program. In general (non-university specific) studies, these evaluations ask students to assess program quality by noting areas that were done well or poorly and by pointing out topics and domains that received insufficient attention in their training programs.

In evaluations of specific university programs, current and/or recently graduated students are required to judge: (1) the degree to which program goals were met, (2) the extent to which program elements were valuable, and/or (3) self-perceived growth. Only a very few studies have attempted to move beyond the first level on the assessment continuum, that is to design and execute more robust investigations. There are no research articles in the leading journals in the field over the last quarter century which directly assess the skills and knowledge gained in preparation programs. Neither are there any articles that measure changes in the performance of students in schools of program graduates (Murphy & Vriesenga, 2004).

On the upside, colleagues who have completed existing studies have pointed us in the right direction. They have also driven some important foundational pillars on which the next generation of work in this long neglected area can build. These are hardly minor accomplishments. At the same time, existing studies represent an oasis rather than a fertile field of knowledge. Work here, as elsewhere, remains ad hoc in nature. We also see the tendency for studies to pick off the low hanging fruit; inquiry around the more difficult, more complex, yet ultimately more meaningful questions is largely missing. Pursuing this avenue, by design, overvalues the perceptions of program participants vis-à-vis the insights of others who work with graduates of preparation programs as well as other forms of perhaps more compelling evidence. Thus, while colleagues

have illuminated the path ahead, research to date does not take us much beyond the starting point.

6. *Research on the context of preparation programs*. To date, scholars attending to the profession of school administration have lavished almost all of their ink on the reform churn inside the field, e.g., the struggle over an appropriate knowledge base for preparation programs (see Donmoyer, 1999; Forsyth & Murphy, 1999; Murphy, 1999b). At the same time, they have devoted remarkable little energy to conceptualizing and studying the context which envelopes the preparatory function. This is a costly omission at any time. It is especially problematic in periods when environments are in flux. Our analysis leads us to conclude that we are experiencing a good deal of contextual seismic activity at the current time. For example, as is the case in PK-12 education (Murphy, 1990b), states are exerting unprecedented influence over what historically has been a somewhat autonomous sphere of activity. At the same time, policy entrepreneurs (e.g., the foundation community) are throwing considerable new energy into the environment surrounding the administrative preparatory function. The points for us here are similar to those introduced elsewhere in this narrative. First, we lack research that provides a portrait of the shifting context in which preparation activity is unfolding. Second, we have almost no research on how this context is influencing the scope and texture of the preparatory function in school administration.

7. *Longitudinal and comprehensive research on specific domains of administration preparation*. In their recent review of research on teacher preparation, Wilson and her colleagues (2001) concluded that in-depth investigations of "particular components of teacher education" (p. 35) should be an essential element in the future research agenda on the education of school teachers. Based on our review of the literature, we reach a similar conclusion for school administration. In way of illustration, we describe the research terrain on four "components" of preparation and offer suggestions about how to nurture the growth of a lusher landscape.

Clinical work. Between 1978 and 2002, five empirical articles on clinical work were published in the four leading refereed journals in school administration, none by the same researcher(s). One investigation provided a descriptive overview of field-based experiences in selected, UCEA-based programs. The other four all attended to various aspects of the internship: a tool for identifying mentors, an analysis of what should be included in an internship experience, a description of activities found in internships, with assessments of the quality of those components, and an investigation of the impact of the internship experience on learners and mentors.

A few observations here merit notice. To begin with, to reinforce a central theme of this analysis, there simply are too few empirical studies to say

much about the internship with any degree of confidence. Given the centrality of the internship to the education process in applied fields and its prominent position in the professional accreditation process (e.g., NCATE), this is troublesome. It is also noteworthy that the larger picture of clinical work across preparation programs is rarely illuminated. In particular, the empirical literature on clinical work provides no insights on how field-based work is woven into and across learning experiences throughout training programs. Given the struggle to scaffold preparation programs in general and classes in particular onto problems of practice rather than academic disciplines, the study of field-based work needs considerably more attention than it has received over the last century.

Students. The body of work here does a reasonable job of marking key dimensions of the student domain of the preparation landscape but does very little to populate the terrain. For example, for nearly a half century critics have bemoaned the state of recruitment and selection in preparation programs (for example, in the 1950s see Hall and McIntyre [1957], in the 1960s AASA [1960], in the 1970s Tyack and Cummings [1977], in the 1980s AACTE [1988], in the 1990s Jacobson [1990], and in the current decade Creighton [2002]. Yet the quite limited body of empirical knowledge we have does little to help us gain purchase on the problem. With the exception of studies on cohorts, there are practically no empirical investigations of students inside preparation programs. Important topics such as the assessment of students almost never appear on the research radar screen, at least as reflected in the profession's key journals. In general, "students tend to be routinely overlooked" (McCarthy, 1999, p. 134).

Program structure and collaborative work. Program structure refers to the organization dimensions of how preservice training systems are constructed and delivered, e.g., whether a program is offered on campus or in a school district, whether it is taught in a traditional format or online. From the assortment of topics that occupy this domain, only the use of cohorts has received any sustained empirical attention in the leading journals of the profession.

In a similar fashion, while the general publication literature and the non-empirical scholarship in the leading journals have attended at least somewhat to the matter of collaboration in the development, delivery, and oversight of preparation programs, that limited interest does not extend to empirical studies. Only one study in the leading journals in school administration over the last quarter century looked empirically at collaboration (see Kochan & Twale, 1998).

Instruction and curriculum. Instruction in graduate preparation programs in school leadership is only very lightly studied, with only five empirical pieces in the four leading academic journals in the field being devoted to teaching over the last quarter century. Three hot topics—problem-based learning, action research, and experience-based instruction—anchor four of the five pieces. The major vault in the curricular warehouse contains information about what is, and more often what is not, being done in particular curricular domains, with one

eye focused on improving the situation. Nonetheless, it would take a leap of faith to draw many conclusions from this limited body of empirical research on curriculum in preparation programs. Indeed, from the extant research, we know little about the traditional curricular domains of preparation programs (e.g., finance, personnel), nor are we provided with much knowledge about the shape of curriculum in a post-theory era where issues around learning and teaching and community are reshaping the profession.

Some Concluding Comments

Looking across these recommendations, it seems to me that we would do well to focus considerable energy on the two big picture ideas. First, we need to know who we are and what we are doing in the area of leadership preparation. We need to do for preparation what Campbell and Newell (1973) and McCarthy and her colleagues (1988, 1997) have done for the professoriate. We need a comprehensive analysis of the state of the field and we need that analysis to reoccur at regular intervals so we can see how and why the preparation function is developing. UCEA through the efforts of Silver and Spuck (1978a, 1978b) laid the groundwork for us a quarter of a century ago. It is more than desirable that we follow up on that seminal initiative. It would provide an excellent background and useful roadmaps for the work that needs to be engaged.

Second, the fragmentary and decentralized approach we have been following in our efforts to strengthen leadership preparation (and to conduct research in school administration for that matter) has proven itself to be fairly barren. We need to come together as a profession to establish a collective agenda around the training and education function. We need to underscore the importance of a small number of important issues that we collectively agree to attack with sufficient force and over a long enough period of time to ensure the likelihood of garnering positive results. To be sure, there are problems associated with this path of action, especially those connected to the need for a strong center of action. It seems, to me at least, that to fail to move in this direction almost guarantees more of the same, individual efforts that do not add up to much and that provide illusionary gains at best.

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