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An Investigation into the Daily Work of Educational Administrators Using Web Log Technology

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“I once sat in a session with an organizational analyst who asked us, a small group of principals, what we did on the job. He diagrammed all our tasks and concluded that we had an impossible job in which we made decisions every few minutes with incomplete information! We all agreed with him! Everybody wants a piece of us.” (Principal Participant #1)

Introduction

Background on Standards

Since the early 1990s multiple professional groups have endeavored to improve the preparation and practice of educational administrators by writing competencies or standards for school superintendents, K-12 principals, directors of special education and directors of community education. Minnesota competencies for school superintendents, enacted into MN Rule 3512 January 1, 1997, reflect the compilation of work published in *Professional Standards for the Superintendency*⁴, which was a study commissioned by the American Association of School Administrators. Its chairman was John Hoyle. The

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⁴ American Association of School Administrators. (1993). *Professional standards for the superintendency*. AASA: Arlington, VA.

document was reviewed by 100 leaders in education, business, government, and other life-roles that provided suggestions in the development of these standards.

The competencies identified for the K-12 Principal in Minnesota mirror those identified in a study published by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (1993), *Principals of Our Changing Schools; Knowledge and Skill Base*⁵. The National Policy Board resource identified 21 domains of knowledge and skills. Milton D. Hakel, Regents Scholar and Professor of Psychology from Bowling Green University in Ohio and his associates developed the domain framework, with each domain having a writing team. There were 102 persons involved in the writing of the book, with other professionals carefully reviewing each section.

According to the Council of Chief State School Officers website,⁶ The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards for School Leaders (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996) were written by representatives from states and professional associations in a partnership with the National Policy Board for Educational Administration in 1994-95. Their efforts were also supported by grants from the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Danforth Foundation.⁷

A 2005 survey was conducted to determine the number of states using standards for administrator certification and preparation programs. The results showed that the ISLLC standards are currently adopted or adapted by 41 of the 46 states that have leadership standards. Simon and Simpson (2005) state: “In the decade since the Council published

⁵ National Policy Board for Educational Administration. (1993). *Principals of our changing schools; Knowledge and skill base*. NPBEA: Arlington, VA.

⁶ Council of Chief State School Officers. Retrieved February 13, 2006, from http://www.ccsso.org/Projects/interstate_consortium_on_school_leadership/isllc_standards/5634.cfm

⁷ Council of Chief State School Officers. (1996) *Interstate school leaders licensure consortium (ISLLC) standards for school leaders*. Retrieved February 13, 2006 from <http://www.ccsso.org/content/pdfs/isllcstd.pdf>

the ISLLC standards, they have become a national model and now serve as common language of leadership expectations across differences in state standards.”⁸

In 2000 the National Policy Board for Educational Administrators appointed a working group charged with three tasks. One of those tasks was to integrate the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Educators (NCATE) and Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) Standards. The new standards were published January 2002.⁹

Another set of administrative competencies, published in 2001, is the National Educational Technology Standards (NETS) for Administrators developed through the Technology Standards for School Administrators (TSSA) Collaborative.¹⁰ It identifies knowledge and skills that make up the basis of what every PK-12 administrator needs to know about and be able to do with technology regardless of specific job role.

International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) has embraced the TSSA standards as the national standards and extended the "core" skills and knowledge to include the specific provisions for administrators in three job roles:

- superintendent and executive cabinet,
- district-level leaders for content-specific or other district programs, and
- campus-level leaders including principals and assistant principals.

An underlying assumption of these standards is that administrators should be competent users of information and technology tools common to information-age professionals.¹¹

A final set of standards, among other initiatives and publications, that will be cited in this article, are published by the National Elementary School Principals Association in

⁸ Sanders, N. M. & Simpson, J. (2005). *State policy framework to develop highly qualified administrators*. CCSSO.

⁹ National Policy Board for Educational Administrators. (2002). *Instructions to implement standards for advanced programs in educational leadership for principals, superintendents, curriculum directors, and supervisors*. Retrieved February 13, 2006 from <http://www.npbea.org/ELCC/Instructions%20to%20ELCC%20Standards.102.pdf>

¹⁰ TSSA Collaborative. (2001). *Technology standards for school administrators*. Retrieved February 13, 2006 from <http://cnets.iste.org/tssa/pdf/tssa.pdf>

¹¹ *National educational technology standards for administrators*. (2001). Retrieved February 13 from <http://osx.latech.edu/administrators>

*NAESP Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do.*¹² These standards merged two NAESP documents *Standards for Quality Elementary and Middle Schools* and *Proficiencies for Principals*. The intent was to show that the content of the two earlier publications is soundly linked. According to Dr. Vincent Ferrandino, “You cannot have a first-rate school without first-rate school leadership. And regardless of how charismatic or personable a school leader is, or how effective a manager, a principal is not going to improve academic achievement for all students unless [he or]she engages in [his]her work differently.”¹³

Problems with Theory to Practice

A review of the groups’ standards sets or necessary competencies reveals some gaps between theory and practice or, in some cases, a lack of acknowledgement that work in schools is neither linear nor predictable. Specific to the preparation of principals, we believe that the following are important issues that are part of the national movement to standardize and broaden principal preparation programs:

- ❖ First, educational administration has a definable body of knowledge, skills, and dispositions. This is evident as the various standard sets are compared next to each other. The words used to describe each standard area may be different, but the intent appears to be the same. Some sets have more standards than others, however, for when the language used in each is disaggregated, the competency categories remain largely the same. Creating grids that identify the comparable standard categories is useful for universities in states such as Minnesota which have their own sets of competencies, but are also responsible for incorporating National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Educators (NCATE) and Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) Standards into their curriculum as part of program accreditation. Increasing numbers of online universities or those near state borders whose populations are equally represented

¹² National Elementary School Principals Association. (2001). *NAESP standards for what principals should know and be able to do*. Alexandria, VA: NAESP.

¹³ Ibid. v.

by residents of more than one state often incorporate The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards for School Leaders, among other combinations. Creating sets of standards has been a positive step in improving the preparation for educational administrators.

- ❖ A second point is that, although the standards may seem clear to the groups' authors, they are often full of education jargon and do not clearly communicate to the aspiring principal the actual work categories contained in the competencies, the developmental progression of leadership skills over time, and the emotions embedded in context of the work activities. As candidates for licensure are asked to demonstrate their “knowledge, skills, and dispositions”¹⁴ for each competency and its subsets, the learners are frequently perplexed as they attempt to determine the demonstrable exhibits that would show required achievement. It becomes quickly understood by participants in principal preparation courses that the work of the principal is indeed different from what they may have expected or assumed.
- ❖ Third, most competencies/standards sets recognize the essential nature of the intersection of knowledge, skills and dispositions in the preparation of principals. Some define this as what an administrator must “know, be able to do, and be like”¹⁵ when performing the duties of the principal. There are many strong examples of texts used in principal preparation courses—(Sergiovanni, 2006; Lunenberg & Irby, 2006; Ubben, Hughes, & Norris, 2004; Matthews & Crow, 2003; Kowalski, 2005; Schumaker & Sommers, 2001; Speck, 1999; Drake & Roe, 1999; among others)—where the authors incorporate research and practice frameworks from multiple sources. Despite the use of multiple texts and purposeful inclusion of a wide array of leadership perspectives, it is still extremely difficult to capture the full essence of the role. The result often stated by school

¹⁴ National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education. (2002). *Professional standards for the accreditation of schools, colleges, and departments of education*. Retrieved February 15 from <http://www.ncate.org/public/standards.asp>

¹⁵ National Elementary School Principals Association. (2001). *NAESP standards for what principals should know and be able to do*. Alexandria, VA: NAESP.

leaders is that it was not until they were in their first position as a principal, after the completion of the administrative preparation program, that they really learned how to “do” the job.

- ❖ There is a difference between standards that are being written from the vantage point of the “balcony” versus those that might emerge as a result of the “player” reflecting on work as it happens. As competency sets were being developed in meeting rooms across the U.S., the committee participants were removed from the authentic settings that were the focus of their considerations. Being “in the balcony” looking at the whole picture of the role being considered can be useful for many purposes such as dialogue, reflection and writing, about general competencies. However, such a scenario does little to capture the first person detail of events that provide clarity of meaning to the individual pieces which comprise the huge job of being a principal.

- ❖ Finally, over the past number of years, policy makers, business consortia, and citizen groups have aggressively entered into the fray, declaring educational administrators as being ill-prepared to lead high-performing schools. At the same time, with ever increasing mandates legislated with decreasing budgets, our global society and local communities are becoming more complex, and schools are broadening their definition of what it means to provide education for the whole child with the intended outcome of improved learning. Each of these expectations has merit, and each is arguably good for children and society. However, persons who are outside of the educational milieu generally have only a limited understanding of the dynamics of school leadership. There may a point at which principals can no longer absorb additional expectations without reaching saturation resulting in an inability to sustain quality leadership for high performing schools.

As noted above, texts used in principal preparation programs often identify frameworks for thinking about the work of the principal as discrete or single-layer events. However, practicing principals will tell anyone that their daily work is simultaneously

multi-layered and extremely complex. To address these concerns, a new way of studying the work of elementary principals was embarked upon using daily journaling in web-based password-protected chat rooms. With the advent of the internet and the capability to capture real-time reporting of the work of school leaders, the authentic picture accessible through web logs of principals' daily work reveals it to be comprised of both inter-related and totally unrelated events which the principal must juggle at any given moment of the work day.

The original purpose for gathering real-time information was to inform the Licensing and Leadership Development Program for Educational Administrators at the University of Minnesota about current challenges and practices of elementary school principals. The research questions which shaped this study were:

1. Are the current state competencies required for licensing educational administrators reflective of the actual content and work for this leadership role?
2. Does traditional curriculum content in licensure programs reflect the actual role requirements of practicing administrators?
3. Can field experience projects be designed to increase readiness of school administrators to lead high performing and complex school districts, district programs or individual schools as career entrants?
4. Can daily web logs (online journals), designed to address leadership content and practice, provide more concrete and defined feedback to university preparation programs than traditional advisory groups that meet periodically?
5. Can educational administration programs incorporate content and practice sets to address human emotions associated with school leadership?

The Study

Methodology

The study reported in this paper was conducted for one year, from October 2003 through September 2004. It was based on the hypothesis that daily web logs (blogs) written by practicing educational administrators with protected identities can be used to

inform administrator leadership programs and state governing agencies in the identification of educational administrator competencies, authentic content for instruction, and skill development practice sets. The researchers also believed that web logs may also enable the participating individuals to create greater personal meaning for increased professional learning. This is particularly noteworthy because the stand alone state and national standards or competency sets may improve pre-service administrative training, but seem incomplete for the continuous professional learning for practicing educational administrators.

The purpose of this research was to have a deep look into the daily work of elementary principals. To collect the data, three elementary principals were selected representing rural, suburban, and urban districts. Extensive care was taken to strictly protect the identity of each participant so complete openness could be attained. Male and female principals were represented in the sample. Each participant agreed to submit daily entries or, if he or she could not log in on a particular day, the one missed was to be included in the next entry. During vacations participants were not expected to provide entries. The following four questions were addressed by each participant each day in conversational diary entry format:

1. What are the questions (topics) of the day?
2. Who are the participants?
3. What are the emotions?
4. What did you do?

Participants were provided the names and school districts of the other two members in their group but were directed to keep their identities outside of their group strictly confidential. When submitting web entries on the password-protected University of Minnesota web sites developed for this purpose, participants did not use actual names of any individuals being discussed.

Data Analysis

A total of 318 entries were recorded by the elementary principals group. All data were uploaded into NVIVO, a qualitative data analysis software program, to facilitate

coding and analysis. We conducted a content analysis of the documents collected (data) using a coding scheme we developed based (in part) on our College of Education core values (Professional wisdom, Research and inquiry, Authentic practice, Reflection, Lifelong learning and professional development, and Diversity), the state licensure competencies and Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards, and the literature supporting our principal licensure program. The development of codes based on these concepts also included opportunities to allow for open-coding.

We began the coding process with two researchers together coding the entries of one participant. Then the research team met as a whole to discuss the coding in detail, making changes and additions as needed. From these discussions, the code book was revised and expanded. Thereafter, each document was coded by two researchers, with consensus reached on all coding by continuing discussions with the entire research team. The code book continued to be revised through the addition of new codes, more specific definition of codes, and collapsing of codes into one code concept. Documents already coded were re-examined if/when changes were made in the code book.

Many of the 318 entries had multiple codes assigned to them, since the entries may have had multiple things embedded in them. For example, *“I first met with the handicapped child’s third grade teacher about the issue, and then called the parent about her unwillingness to come to the school to discuss it.”* This entry would have codes about communication with teacher and parent, and also a special education code assigned. Thus, most of the entries had several codes, which resulted in there being a total of 4,015 passages coded within the 318 entries.

When coding each entry, the researchers searched for identity indicators, and when found, used masking techniques that did not change the intent of the entry but prevented individual identifies from being disclosed. When entries could not be masked they were deleted. To ensure anonymity, all of the entries were reviewed a minimum of three times by the researchers. This was followed by the three participating principals being asked to

read their own entries and agree that their and others' identities had not been compromised in any way.

Frequency Results

By Core Values in the College

Looking at passages coded across all three participants lends itself to a greater understanding of the daily work of elementary school principals and the focus of their thoughts and actions. For example, as previously stated, one of the goals of the current study was to determine alignment of principals' work lives with the core values of the University's College of Education identified below:

- Professional wisdom
- Research and inquiry
- Authentic practice
- Reflection
- Lifelong learning and professional development, and
- Diversity

The greatest number of passages were coded for Reflection (219 passages coded), which was not surprising since the process of blogging about daily experiences is wholly reflective. However it is interesting to note that the second highest core value coded was Lifelong learning and professional development (146 passages coded). Participants mentioned the importance of lifelong learning and professional development for themselves, their peers, and their faculty and staff members. They also gave many examples of participating in, developing, and leading professional development. The third most frequently coded value was significantly less than those first two and was Diversity (40 passages coded). This is noteworthy in that diversity is a very public issue in the current political environment, but was written about much less often than was either Reflection or Lifelong learning and professional development.

By Type of Leadership Activity

Table 1 below details the five codes most frequently applied to the data entries for each of the three participants. The activity that had the highest number of passages coded

was Communication. This is likely because the category covered many different types of communication -- formal and informal, with many different sizes and types of groups (individual, small groups, large groups – parents, students, staff, peers, community, and district office). One interesting piece of an analysis of the communication codes shows that these three participants had almost as many communication opportunities with parents (235 passages coded) as with faculty and staff (253 passages coded). This finding shows the importance of teaching pre-service administrators how to communicate with parents around many different topics and in many different settings.

Another interesting set of findings when looking at this table is the fact that nearly all of the actions most frequently written about were within the same top five categories. Issues around Human Resources and Pupil Management appear to consume much of the attention of the principal on an almost daily basis. This table also visibly portrays the differences in style of how one goes about being a principal, or at least writing about the job. The setting may make the difference as well, since the number of staff and students in the rural school was markedly less than was at either the urban or suburban school. The teaching and learning or instructional leader role of being a principal varied by participant, as it shows to have a relatively more prominent role for the rural principal than it did for the other two participants.

Table 1: Top Five Most Frequent Type of Coded Passages Within the Entries

	Participant #1 (Urban) Posted 150 Total Entries, With 2060 Coded Passages	Participant #2 (Suburban) Posted 95 Total Entries, With 1432 Coded Passages	Participant #3 (Rural) Posted 73 Total Entries, With 523 Coded Passages
1.	Communication 672 passages	Communication 504 passages	Communication 153 passages
2.	Human Resources 252 passages	Human Resources 120 passages	Teaching and Learning 39 passages
3.	Pupil Management 133 passages	Pupil Management 111 passages	Pupil Management 38 passages
4.	Lifelong Learning and Professional Development 92 passages	Special Education 61 passages	Human Resources 36 passages
5.	Teaching and Learning 98 passages	Teaching and Learning 57 passages	Finance/Budget 26 passages Conflict 26 passages (tie)

A typical entry about Teaching and Learning from Participant #3 is the following:

“I also met with a first grade teacher to go over her student data in reading and math. We try to have each first grader reading at grade level or higher by the end of the school year. She has one-third of her students really struggling so we brainstormed some ideas to provide more assistance to her students. I meet with all the classroom teachers at this time of year to review student data and compare my notes from my October meetings with them. This way, I get a very good idea about how students are progressing as we enter the final months of the school year. I am also able to re-align resources to meet the needs of those students in greatest academic needs.”

Linkages between National Standards and Web Log Entries

When coding the over 300 entries, the research team developed coding categories that became evident from the content and context of the text rather than base the codes on any of the specific language as the standards are currently defined. Nevertheless, we found that most of the coding categories used are also incorporated into some or all of the national standards; thereby reaffirming the definable body of information that has been identified multiple times in each set of standards that has previously been developed.

The more important discoveries from this research are those that add context to the standards and increase meaning by being able to see how each is authentically applied. The following are examples:

Finding: Each day is filled with variety in topics, people and emotion; the leader must be able to move from one topic to the next seamlessly

By reading the data entries in diary fashion, one can easily see the variety of topics happening all at one time or in a short time span, such as in one day's work. An example of this is seen in the following randomly selected journal entry for one day:

Principal #1 –May 6

“I started the day with a Child Study meeting. A parent had requested that an evaluation be done on her child as she does not think that he is learning. She came to the meeting and was quite emotional about it because the child was born with the cord wrapped around his neck, and she is frustrated as she sees so little progress. The team agreed that an assessment is in order. It will be done at the beginning of the next school year, and she will get medical documentation over the summer.”

“The PTA did a staff appreciation breakfast with lots of yummy food.”

“I had a noon board meeting with a community group that dedicates itself to supporting various enrichment programs in schools. The board members are so dedicated and committed. The meeting was fairly routine.”

“I asked the performing arts teacher to meet so that we could finish up from yesterday. We met at the end of the school day. I ended our meeting by informing him that I would not be recommending him for contract renewal. He was very surprised as he believes that he has met all expectations/standards.”

“Afterwards, a team of two teachers and I interviewed a voluntary transfer for the fourth grade position. We decided that I would contact the candidate to see if she would like it.”

“These days are filled with extremes!”

Finding: Work is layered and occurs over time

When reading all of the topical passages one can see the time of year that various applications begin, the continuity of the monitoring processes, the people who have a role in each process, knowing those impacted by it, and the feelings that surface in the leadership and management process. Our use of the NVivo software for coding large qualitative data sets allows the data to be sorted by subject areas and enables single topical areas to be pulled from the larger data sets.

Though it is important for the learner to be able to read the daily journals as a whole, it is also powerful in learning about subject areas, such as finance and budget, and be able to disaggregate the entries. The following are examples of some of the 104 passages and 90 documents that included references to finance or budget in the elementary principal blogs over one year.

Principal #2—October 15

“There are many inherent issues--the biggest one being boundary changes to accommodate a magnet concept and also how to introduce the concept in a time with budget reductions, etc.”

October 21

“We are busy trying to untangle a large budget mess with non-budgeted revenue items which ended up about \$15,000 in the red for last year, mainly because of incorrect coding.”

“All of my rambling does show that it is important for the principal to have a clear and thorough understanding of school finance, which many of my district colleagues have ignored because they assign finance and budgeting responsibilities to a secretary.”

October 28

“Following that observation, I met with the media specialist and her counterpart from the district office to talk about the year in terms of budget, curriculum, etc. It was a rather benign meeting because, again, I have a great media specialist who is doing a super job. Certainly makes my job easier.”

November 18

“We have gone through major custodial staff reductions with our budget reductions, which means classrooms are vacuumed perhaps once every three days, if we're lucky.”

“We are in the process of using last year's proposal. In February we receive our capital budget allocation from the district and as a staff we determine how it is allocated with final approval coming from the site council. Later in spring we receive our instructional budget and as team leaders we determine how that is allocated, of course most of that remains for instructional supplies throughout the year.”

Principal #3—November 7

“I met with our Parent Advisory Council president today to put together our November agenda. We are in the process of completing our school wide fund raiser and have collected about \$22,000 in profits from this year's efforts. This is the first year that we have been involved with an all-school sale that raised this much money, and so we will have to decide how to reset our goals for the use of these funds. We talked through the process she would use to help this parent

group accomplish this task. I think when she left, that she felt good about making this happen. We will meet next week, so I'll let you know the results."

November 11

"We do have some Staff Development money that is allocated to our site that this group has the ability to use. We tie these funds to our building goals that are set each year with staff input. We use these monies to help carry out the action plans that are developed to meet these goals and to address our building's staff development needs."

"I ended the day by meeting with our Parent Advisory Council (PAC). This group is open to all parents who want to attend. We get anywhere from 10-15 parents attending each month. This month we talked about how we should spend our funds that were recently raised from our all school fund raiser. It was decided that we would seek input from the teaching staff and our parents for new ideas regarding the distribution of these funds. We will send out a survey to parents and talk to staff in an upcoming staff meeting to gather ideas. They will be compiled and be available at our next PAC meeting to help us set goals for this area."

November 13

"Our budget process begins after the first of the year. We are beginning to gather ideas for budget reductions for next year. We were asked by our superintendent to look at about \$500,000 in cuts for next year. This is the third year in a row that we have had to reduce this amount. It is a harder process this year, because there aren't many more things we can cut that don't greatly impact our children. In the past we were asked to only look for cuts in our building and pass those on to the central office where the superintendent would decide on the final list. This year we are able to look for ideas across the district."

Finding: Complex events are usually on-going and often span a long period of time

Over the course of the entire year and among the hundreds of journal entries, one of the principals had 23 different entries which focused on a particular personnel problem that was complex and persisted over time with an employee. After reading all of the journal entries in this case study, one can see and “feel” the complexity of the problems, the sense of no-control, the importance of each member of an organization to the success of high performing schools, and the role that personnel at the district office must play to resolve issues such as those involving significant human resources deficiencies. There is an enormous time and emotional toll that unresolved issues can have on the work and health of the administrator. The following single entry captures the essence of this case study:

“[This morning] one of my secretaries came in and unloaded on me telling me that I am impossible to work for, demand perfection, is certainly glad she is not my child since nothing is ever right and then she went into all of the transgressions of my other secretary and the person who was in this employee’s role before her. I was told (and didn’t need to be because I knew it) that she is a ‘nervous wreck – I never give compliments or thanks and just expect more and more and more.’ We had a disagreement over the evaluation I gave her last spring and she ended with ‘I don’t deserve the evaluation you gave me last spring.’ When I responded with, ‘I disagree,’ she got up, walked out and slammed my office door. By this afternoon she was over it and I could talk with her. Nothing will really be resolved because she does just enough to get by, but after many years she still does not see the big picture and how all of the pieces of the building fit into the puzzle.”

Finding: The work of the principal is filled with emotions

One of the areas that is seldom addressed in textbooks that are written for the preparation of principals is emotion. Yet, in reading first person journals of the principal participants, human emotion is prevalent throughout, including joy, pride, frustration, anger, sadness and a sense of full, partial or no control over the responsibilities and circumstances involved in leading a school. For purposes of this study, the emotions had

to be explicitly stated (we did not infer them) and were coded as “good” (positive, such as joy or pride), “bad” (negative, such as anger or sadness), or “no control” (with stated frustration).

By examining the emotions described in the entire body of data, one gains a strongly grounded sense of the positive and negative stressors of the principalship. Perhaps as a result of reading these entries, aspiring principals can make better judgments prior to entering the principalship about their willingness and their capacity to manage these types and levels of conflict within their own personal boundaries. Asking these questions of oneself, based on an authentic preview of the activities and emotional assessment of each, can help the individual determine if the principalship is the right career for him or her prior to the expenditure of money and time to fully prepare for this role. Examples of the range of events and emotions expressed in the web logs are found in the following:

Student-related:

“This is so frustrating when a student doesn't qualify for any services and is getting everything that we can give him -Title 1, ESL and after-school tutoring. The teachers and I left the meeting really feeling down.” (Participant #1)

“I had a really tough situation last school year. We had a kindergarten child identified with FAS [fetal alcohol syndrome] effects, not the full blown syndrome, with an IEP. He needed a higher level of special education programming, which the parents refused. They obtained a lawyer. We did tons of interventions and documentation and were ready to go to hearing in July. Right before the hearing, the parents agreed to a higher level of programming. Almost a whole year was lost for this child. In addition, his presence affected the rest of the students and their learning.” (Participant #2)

“It's so unfortunate that our critics aren't able to see the passion and commitment our teachers have for our kids.” (Participant #3)

“I was able to get into classrooms today - 8 of them. It was fun to see what the teachers and students were working on and to talk with students about what they are learning. It seems like a long time since I was in classrooms.” (Participant #2)

Staff-related:

“I found that two of my EA's [education assistants] - the reflection room and the home-school liaison - had been bumped by others with more seniority. These are two exceptional employees. So, I spent the weekend being bummed out.” (Participant #1)

“I had to hire the speech clinician I interviewed earlier this week. She was NOT my choice but in checking with HR I discovered that I was the only bldg left with a full time position and she was the only full time speech clinician not placed--wonder why. Her skills are fantastic but her adult, staff skills are horrible. When my staff heard that I had interviewed her they all came to discourage me from hiring her--but then there isn't a choice. Could prove interesting next year...Time will tell--perhaps she will change and things will go well.” (Participant #2)

“I am so angry with the teacher because he has been warned, given letters of advice and reprimand since 1985 regarding touching kids and I am also angry with the kids because what he has done is not criminal nor sexual in any way. It really appears (and this is solely my opinion) that a couple of kids are out to get him and, in reality, he set himself up to be gotten! And it has really sent the staff into tailspin because I was told I could say nothing so they are all wondering what's happening, etc. so that hasn't helped morale at all.” (Participant #2)

“Of course, parents are upset. I spent an hour on the phone today with the site council co-chair, who wanted answers to why the teacher was not coming back, etc., and who was I accountable to. Later, she sent an e-mail to my supervisor with her concerns about the teacher.” (Participant #3)

“And then, there's my wonderful secretary. I finally am able to express my frustration in a quote I heard the other day that really fits because neither I nor my assistant can pin down what she's doing or not doing that isn't working which is extremely frustrating but I am able to say that her short-comings are like trying to 'nail Jello to a tree'--you can't do it. I have never faced a situation like this before.” (Participant #2)

“I am interviewing nurses. Mine resigned this summer--didn't bother to tell anyone until she called it in.” (Participant #3)

District-office related:

“Principals expressed a lot of frustration about doing every other central office department's work so that they can't implement their own visions for their buildings, that central office dictates how building should spend their money on programs imposed on us in spite of having site councils, how everyone is always telling us what to do (what's new about this?), that staff is the last to know about new programs - the community is notified and calls the school, and we don't know how to respond.” (Participant #2)

“The meeting started 20 minutes late which made everyone crazy - you know how much principals value minutes! The meeting lasted until 12:00 p.m., but could have ended sooner if the agenda had been more compact. The new School Improvement Plan (SIP) format was introduced. We have a new format each year which drives us crazy as it takes time to learn and use. Last year, some schools didn't have the updated hardware for the SIP program, so principals had to go to do a district facility to enter their SIP!!” (Participant #1)

“We also found out that there will be public hearing on the budget on February 19. I asked if that would delay getting building allocations out by the end of the month. The area supt. didn't know. Then, I got an e-mail this afternoon about that forum stating that three different budget options would be presented. Principals

don't know what these options are. Is there something wrong with this picture?"
(Participant #1)

"The frustrating part of this whole situation is that it appears that there is no one at the district office willing to look at it in a different light and be willing to perhaps make some adjustments." (Participant #2)

Community, parent, and legislature related:

"At the local leadership meeting our legal counsel talked about how the legislature will probably end up deadlocked again, and there is no inflation costs being built into funding for us. What a bummer for kids." (Participant #2)

"The district's communications office set up an interview for me with a radio station this morning regarding the cut in integration aid to districts, like mine, that was passed by the House. 19% of my budget is integration dollars. If the aid is cut - I will have to cut 4 teachers and half of our contract with our community partner. In other words, we would have to close shop." (Participant #1)

"Even though I thoroughly understand the parents' predicament, I have no choice but to follow the district's procedures." (Participant #3)

Web Logs Portray the Range of Approaches to Viewing Similar Problems

Concrete examples for aspiring principals and field experience mentors are helpful in illuminating the wide range of actions that can be subsumed under a generic topic. As an illustration, one of the code categories used for the elementary principal journals was Pupil Management, identified as a subset of entries identified previously in Table 1. In Table 2 below, one can see how the 282 passages about Pupil Management that the principals made over the year were spread across the sites, from urban to rural. It also shows how a topic as broad as Pupil Management needs to have more specific

aspects included in the standards and the assessment of attainment of any standard related to it.

Table 2: Passages within Entries Coded Pupil Management (PM)

	Participant 1 (Urban)	Participant 2 (Suburban)	Participant 3 (Rural)	Totals
PM-general	5	16	0	21
PM Discipline	47	14	11	72
PM Attendance and Transitions	23	35	12	70
PM Health and Safety	19	27	2	48
PM Guidance	6	2	3	11
PM Student Activities	33	17	10	60
PM Totals	133	111	38	282

The variety of situational applications found in the web logs add meaning and context to the role of the elementary principal and reveal the importance of and the need for providing specific language to address pupil management as a skill set in principal preparation programs. The language currently found in standards, such as in the Minnesota competencies for K-12 principals and the ISLLC standards, implies pupil management as part of the principal’s work, but the actual skills are embedded so deeply in the larger concepts that they may be difficult to discern for aspiring principals whose learning styles and beginning experiences may benefit from concrete examples.

The journal entries can also be useful for incumbent principals who are looking for additional ways that various issues may be addressed. Some examples from the participants’ entries are:

Pupil Management: Health and Safety

Principal #1—October 23

“Transportation called to tell us about a late bus as one of my students supposedly hurt her arm so bad that the paramedics had to be called.”

October 28

“...[A] teacher said there was a lot of glass on the playground that should be swept up – I talked to the custodian afterwards.”

“...[A]nd a student reported that he was sexually harassed.”

November 17

“I ended the day meeting with staff from my Early Childhood Special Education program regarding a letter they are sending to the county regarding a family [and the concerns they have for the child’s health].”

Pupil Management: Discipline

Principal #2—January 15

“I had to meet with the fifth grade to have a little meeting regarding their playground behavior. It went well and I think things will turn around starting tomorrow.”

March 8

“The day was rather ordinary except for the snow. The snow and the temperature made it perfect snowball weather and so we had the office full of folks who couldn’t resist making and throwing snowballs at noon recess.”

March 9

“This morning began with our elementary leadership team meeting. We talked about the usual stuff – including a follow-up to a workshop on bullying that was held last Tuesday. It was an excellent workshop with great ideas and I guess I liked it because it validated much of what we do here in terms of discipline. It was also timely because we have established a behavior task force to look at our discipline plan, etc. The whole idea was a hot potato – one person raised the prospect of a character education curriculum. Well, that set several other staff off who wanted no part of it. So when we met, I set the stage by talking about how

well we do on the state tests but that doesn't stop us from planning and looking at how we can get even better. I then said that even though we are doing well with our current behavior plan and it is working, we need to also look at how we can make it even better. Luckily, everyone bought into that. I started the meeting with a format of helping them list the need and moved into the purpose."

Pupil Management: Attendance and Transitions

Principal #3—May 26

"...[H]aving a class exchange allows kids to go to their next year's classrooms and spend some time with their classmates and the new teacher."

"I have had a chance to talk with some parents about placement of their children for next year. Even though I feel we give a fair chance for parent input up front before we do class lists, we still have a few parents who think that "No" never means "No". They put in a request and when a certain friend isn't in the room they request another change. Oh well, we keep trying to do our best."

September 7

"...[I] worked on placing incoming students to balance class sizes at each school. This is always a tough job as we may have to move children who don't live in our boundary areas out of the school they have been attending to make room for any new students that move into our attendance areas. We have many unhappy parents because of this issue."

Creating Curriculum Using the Authentic Practice Experiences from Web Logs

When disaggregating the web log data into topical areas where there are multiple entries over time, patterns of work emerge which can be used to create authentic practice sets for the learner. We began with a framework of skills related to finance/budget as identified by national and state standards. Then, research articles from the literature and chapters in textbooks were coupled with all of the entries that the principals wrote that related to issues and events around the topic of finance and budgeting. The following is

an example of an authentic practice set that was designed based on the 104 entries about finance and budget from the web log participants. It exemplifies the fact that competencies do not stand alone but are applied as part of a whole:

“Project Four: Managing the Budget”¹⁶

“Select one of the following budgets that have been adopted: the district wide budget, the district special education budget, the district community education budget or an elementary, middle or high school building budget. For the budget selected:

- Identify all of the Uniform Financial Accounting and Reporting Standards (UFARS) codes used in the specified budget and the sources of revenue for each code. What are the expenditures allowed from each code?
- Identify and analyze the policies and procedures used to expend the resources including the forms, and procedures used to authorize expenditures and to pay bills. Update the policy and procedures handbooks as needed to stay abreast with state laws and unit needs. Follow laws and procedures governing the process of policy development.
- Determine what aspects of the budget process are delegated and to whom.
- Identify who has signature authority at each level of the process and what does each signature authorize.
- Analyze existing or create new continuous professional learning content and delivery processes needed to assure accountability for each line and staff member authorized to expend school and school district funds.
- Identify the check-points in the budget process. How does the administrator monitor the processes that result in a balanced budget at the end of the fiscal year?
- Identify the options available to the administrator when irregularities are found in the budget such as a staff member not following procedures; over expenditure of budgets by individuals, grade levels, or departments; under expenditures of allocated funds, money unaccounted for, etc.?

¹⁶ Werner, A. Wilson, T. & Yen Y. (2006). *Layered learning module one: Minnesota education finance*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota.

- Identify the differences in administering building level student activity finances verses the other funding accounts.

For each of the bulleted work sets within the system of finance and budget, identify your plan of action including what you and members of your organization will need to know and the sources of that information: use of human resources – delegation of authority, the expectations for outputs, the steps necessary to complete the bullet, the timeline, and the evaluation process used to determine effectiveness.”

Using the series of questions above, and with the graduate students having the written resources of texts, articles, and principals’ web logs, the teaching of finance and budget to pre-service administrators is truly based in the real-world. Units or topics with this level of specificity may go a long way to decrease the gap between knowing and being able to do on the first day of a an entrant principal’s new career.

Reflections on the process from the participants:

The motivators that helped participants stay involved in this lengthy and time-consuming commitment were many. The knowledge that participants were to have the opportunity to inform the profession in a significant way about the actual work of elementary principals and to be able to learn from their team of participants helped them stay focused on the process. Two of them also commented that as a result of the written reflections they were able to leave difficult issues in the office rather than carry those concerns home to continue to mentally process them.

Participants sometimes asked each other questions or shared insights to support their colleagues in matters that were addressed by an individual. This was not a required part of the commitment but a natural outcome that was deemed valuable by the principals. The following are a few reflections by the participants regarding their participation in this study and keeping a journal for a year:

“The strength that I see [for this project] is the chance for students working towards their administration degrees to get a real life look at the issues that we face as principals as they happen. It also gives the mentors a chance to reflect on the events they are involved in each day, and maybe to evaluate our actions. It is really nice to see the world of other people who work in our field and learn about their issues. The hard part is finding the time it takes to do the daily reflections and to document them. I have tried to do this at the end of the day; I don't like to take the desk time away from being out in the building that it takes to type this up. This is only a minor issue that doesn't out-weigh the benefits.”

“From the daily reflection, one can see that elementary principals are involved in many scenarios requiring a variety of skills used in a flexible style. Similarities and differences are there among the settings. I have enjoyed reading the postings as well as being part of them. Hopefully, the process will be able to really impact the future training of principals.”

“The biggest drawback to this process is that it is not a 15 minutes a day thing! I still haven't found the best time of day to do the reading and entering of reflections. But, in the world of the principal, there is no ‘best’ time! I have found that when I sneak this time in between meetings or scheduled activities - that is ‘on the fly,’ I can remember to log on and do this. I could spend much more time if I actually took the time to respond to either of my other colleagues in my web-log group. To have such an ongoing dialogue would be quite an enriching experience!”

“In regard to the value to this process, I concur completely with [my colleagues]. The reflection is great; finding the time to post is a challenge. I have enjoyed reading the postings and find them helpful as I face similar situations. I agree with my colleague that it would be helpful to have time to dialogue with each other as well.”

“I read all the materials this weekend. The logs are wonderful—[for example,] they illustrate how the budget process is fluid, full of emotions and off-target when it comes to

kids. I can fully understand why you get so excited when you talk about the entries that we did. You have done a good job in protecting identities.”

Conclusions and Next Steps

The results from this project are exciting and have created a deeper meaning of the complexities, timelines, and context of the work of the elementary principal. It also has allowed the reader to experience, through first-person accounts, the emotions behind the work of the elementary principal and the toll that they can bring to a leader and the organization. Essential competencies, based in what was written into the daily entries and which are seldom discussed in principal preparation programs and texts, are the importance of mental dexterity, the ability to problem solve in multi-faceted and emotion-laden situations, as well as having the physical stamina to do the work. These findings appear from the data set as a whole and are evident as one unpacks the multiple layers of each journal entry.

The usefulness of the journal entries will enhance not only principal preparation programs, but also serve to inform government leaders, those in positions in the hierarchy of education, as well as parents and the community, creating greater understanding of the facets of school leadership and increasing the potential for stronger working relationships. The data showed the longitudinal nature of the complex work of educational administrators. It also showed the rigor, complexities, and intellectual dexterity necessary to serve in these positions, as well as the influences that increase or decrease the challenges of the positions.

The quality and the usefulness of the entries have prompted the researchers to replicate this study with additional groups of educational administrators—secondary principals, superintendents, and directors of special education and community education. Finally, the results of this study and those of the upcoming data from the web logs of additional school leaders will assist in the development of more authentic field experience project-based studies, and will be used as a basis to compare state and national standards/competencies for educational administrators, with the actual work performed

by individuals in those roles informing key revisions. Collecting the data about the real work will continue as our focus for several years to come.

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