

Best Practices in Principal Professional Development

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines principals' perceptions of effective principal professional development programs and needs. Results from this research study are valuable because they can provide impactful insights for state departments of education, district leadership, and principals in the planning, development, and administration of principal professional development programs. Specifically, the research study focuses upon two overarching research questions. First, how do principals and district instructional leaders describe effective principal professional development? Second, how do principals and district instructional leaders describe current and future principal professional development needs? Findings support a community of practice as a vital tool for principal development.

Keywords

principal professional development, communities of practice, principal learning, systems approach, applied learning, principal coaching

Introduction

A great deal of research on K-12 teacher professional development, and research exists on the need for principal professional development (Zepeda, Parylo & Bengston, 2014). However, little research exists on the most effective methods of principal professional development. Effective principals are important because they set the tone for the school and school community (Green, 2016), impact teacher morale and self-efficacy (Fiaz, et. al, 2017; Francis, 2017; Ma & Marion, 2019)) and teacher turnover (Boyd, et. al, 2011; Grissom, 2011), as well as impact student achievement results (Soehner & Ryan, 2011; Terziu, Hasani & Osmani, 2016).

According to Leithwood, et. al (2004), “The principal is second only to the teacher in terms of impact on student learning” (p.5). To that end, principals participate in professional development (Lavigne, et. al, 2016; Taie & Goldring, 2019), most often through district initiatives or conferences (Lewis & Scott, 2020). However, does that professional development create the change needed?

Consequently, this study serves to examine effective principal professional development practices, particularly through Wenger’s theoretical framework of Communities of Practice (Wenger, 2010). The framework of Communities of Practice (CoP) has been widely used in the field of business (Borges, et. al, 2017; Hernaez & Campos, 2011) as well in teacher professional development (Tribona, et. al, 2019). However, this theoretical framework is not widely used in principal professional development.

Literature Review

The principalship

The principalship has evolved in the last two decades, in so much that principals must fulfill

multiple roles: building manager, instructional leader and change agent (Hallinger, 2010; Kowalski, 2010; Mirfani, A.M., 2019; and Naidoo, 2019). The role of the change agent was most recently highlighted in the 2001 legislation *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)*, which required each student subgroup of students to meet federally set learning targets called Adequately Yearly Progress (AYP). With this requirement, schools suffered consequences if every subgroup did not meet that learning target, such as a being labeled a “School in Need of Improvement” (Whitney & Candelaria, 2017).

The problem with this legislation is that the learning targets were moving targets. Each year, the target changed, and more schools were labeled as needing improvement. One of the impacts of this legislation was increased scrutiny of school leaders and teachers and increased levels of anxiety among school-aged children over standardized testing (Segool et al, 2013; Wolf & Smith, 1995).

NCLB was most recently replaced with the 2015 legislation *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*. Both pieces of legislation require high-stakes, mandatory testing, which increases pressure on school systems, principals and teachers. Despite the fact that *ESSA* gives states more flexibility in selecting another measure of school quality, the federal government still had to approve of the evaluation plans. Therefore, increased pressure to perform coupled with public scrutiny created the nucleus of needed change in schools. However, one must ask if principals are equipped to handle the three roles of building manager, instructional leader and change agent.

Since the 2001 *NCLB* legislation, much research has been done on the lack of preparedness of school principals for the

changing demands of the job (Duncan, Range & Scherz, 2011; Garrison-Wade, Sobel, & Fulmer, 2017; Grissom, Bartanen & Mitani, 2019). In fact, *ESSA* recognizes the importance of school leadership and highlights that leadership is a school improvement strategy to which states and districts can earmark federal funds (Herman et al., 2017).

Professional development for principals

What principals receive in the form of professional development (PD) is not unlike what teachers receive. Wei, et. al. (2009) noted that there is a significant gap between what teachers receive in the form of PD and what they hope to receive. Too often, PD is based on a program or the newest fun technological tool rather than people and practices (Reeves, 2010). Reeves (2010) states that effective teacher PD needs to focus on three things: student learning, evaluation of efforts, and people and practices. Should principal PD be any different?

Adding to the problem, principals do not like to acknowledge deficiencies in skill due to the fear of judgment (Koonce, et. al, 2019; Westberry, 2020). With this fear to acknowledge the need for support and the lack of quality support, effective PD for principals creates a learning chasm that is difficult to fill. This chasm then has a direct impact on the teachers' learning and self-efficacy, student achievement (Fiaz, et. al, 2017; Francis, 2017; Ma & Marion, 2019) as well as principal burnout (Olsen & Sexton, 2009; Riley & Langan-Fox, 2013). Koonce et al. (2019) noted that staff development is the responsibility of school administrators and other district leaders when referring to teachers, so who is responsible for principal professional development?

All too often, critics are quick to blame the principal preparation programs for

deficiencies (Bayar, 2016), stating that "Principal training at the majority of university-based programs has long been upbraided for being out of touch with district needs and leaving graduates ill-prepared to lead" (Mendels & Mitgang, 2013, p. 23). District officials and critics must, however, remember the following:

When a teacher completes a master's program to gain administrative certification, that teacher will statistically remain in the teacher role for an average of five years (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019). Once that teacher gains an assistant principal role, that assistant principal is taught his or her responsibilities. That administrator will become proficient in his or her lane...the average tenure of that assistant principal prior to obtaining a principalship is an estimated additional five years. At this point, the candidate is now ten years or more removed from the certification program. (Westberry, 2020, p. 6)

Augmenting this view, Mendels and Mitgang (2013) continue to say that once districts "hire new principals, districts have a continuing responsibility to promote these principal's growth and success" (p. 24). However, in a 2017 study of public-school principals in the United States, only 50% of principals reported experiencing any type of coaching (Wise & Cavazos, 2017). Furthermore, Johnston et al. (2016), in another national study, reported the following:

Almost all principals reported having some form of district-provided, on-the-job support available during the past school year, but less than a third indicated their district provided a

combination of regular supervisory communication, mentoring for principals at varying experience levels, and at least one day of professional development specifically for school leaders over the past year. (p. 1)

The gap in the need and the provision of quality principal professional development places a sizable burden on the principal. As principals are expected to provide a vision, structure, resources, and processes necessary to create an environment for teachers that is conducive to professional learning (Koonce, et al., 2019), principals need to be provided the same. Moreover, the challenge is to provide quality professional development that results in learning transference. A tremendous amount of money is spent each year in the nation on training, but only 10% of learning results in transference to the workplace practice (Foley & Kaiser, 2013; Hung, 2013).

According to Lave and Wenger (1991), learning is “increasing participation in communities of practice” (p. 49), not just the receiving of information. For principals, the need for ongoing professional development is clear, especially with the shift in focus from being a building manager to becoming an effective instructional leader (Boyce & Bowers, 2018; Hallinger, Gumus & Bellibas, 2020; Wilkinson, et. al, 2019) in addition to the ever-increasing demands placed on principals (Beusaert et al., 2016; Westberry, 2020). In essence, principals have too few opportunities to engage in professional learning to hone their skills and focus on improving teaching and learning in their buildings for the benefit of students (Rowland, 2017).

Communities of practice

Communities of Practice, as defined by Wenger (2011) are “groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and

learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (p.1). This type of professional learning requires participants to engage with the material and with one another. For teachers, this type of engagement has been found to positively impact the culture and climate of teaching and learning (Hoy et al, 2006; Patton & Parker, 2017). Furthermore, a recent study conducted during the onset of the recent pandemic found that principals who adjusted well to the digital platform relied on a strong community of practice (Sterrett & Richardson, 2020).

To qualify as a community of practice, Wenger (2013) states that three elements must exist: domain, community, and practice. Specifically, the domain is a shared interest with a commitment to collective competence. Meaning, members of this group are committed to growing and learning with and from one another.

The community does not just include members who share the interest, but must include those who engage in joint discussion, collaborative activities, and shared information. Lastly, the practice results in a shared repository of resources, tools, and applications. To create a CoP, time and consistent interaction is necessary (Wenger, 2013).

Some may argue that principals have established CoP’s with their cohort peers. For example, a district may have a district meeting or professional development with all elementary principals.

The structure and intent of that meeting as well as planned interactions of the elementary principals determine if that cohort constitutes a CoP. Does that group meet consistently to share information? Do the principals share lessons learned? Do they plan together to solve a problem? Most principal

meetings are “sit and get” pressure cookers that set expectations of outcomes but do not allow for that type of collaboration (Zepeda, Parylo & Bengston, 2013; Midha, 2020).

Furthermore, principal supervisors are now called upon to shift their focus when working with principals from management issues to instructional leadership (Honig & Rainey, 2019; Turnbull, Riley & MacFarlane, 2013). However, those supervisors may not have the skills necessary or may be encumbered by the political and bureaucratic nature of the system (Corcan et al., 2001).

Additionally, these supervisors are often responsible for principal evaluations. Micheaux and Parvin (2018) state, “To use principal evaluation as a tool for growth, they must be able to coach and give powerful feedback, develop and deliver adult learning, facilitate group learning processes, and cultivate a culture of transparency and continuous learning” (p. 53). Consequently, principal supervisors would have to be well versed and trained to fulfill this role.

Additionally, districts must consider the stage of the principalship as different career stages need different professional supports and targeted learning. Weindling (2000) helped to identify the six different career stages of the principalship as thus:

- Stage 1 First Months: Entry and developing a cognitive map of the landscape
- Stage 2 First Year: Developing a deeper understanding of the key issues
- Stage 3 Second Year: Reshaping and implementing change
- Stage 4 Years Three to Four: Refinement of changes
- Stage 5 Years Five to Seven: Consolidation of all planned changes

Stage 6 Years Eight and beyond: Plateau is reached

Lazenby, McCulla, & Marks (2020) simplify these stages even further to include only three stages:

- Stage 1 Preparation and Appointment
- Stage 2 Newly Appointed Stage: Early Years (0-4)
- Stage 3 Experienced Stage: Mid & Late Career

Though very little research exists to support the needs of the mid and late career-staged principals (Mulford et al., 2008; Oplatka, 2010), the more tenured principals may need just as much if not more assistance. As teachers are expected to provide differentiated instruction for students, principals need that differentiated support based on where they are in their careers (Oplatka, 2004). Principals, therefore, need a network of similarly staged principals to support their efforts to learn and grow in a CoP (Lazenby, McCulla & Marks, 2020). CoP’s provide a framework for learning in social and situated contexts such as principal professional development.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine principals’ perceptions of effective principal professional development programs and needs. Results from this research study are valuable because they can provide impactful insights for state departments of education, district leadership, and principals in the planning, development, and administration of principal professional development programs. Specifically, the research study focuses upon two overarching research questions. First, how do principals and district instructional leaders describe effective principal professional

development? Second, how do principals and district instructional leaders describe current and future principal professional development needs?

Methodology

A wide array of research designs, methodologies, and theoretical frameworks have been utilized to investigate the effectiveness of K-12 teacher professional development. However, few research studies have focused on effective principal professional development. Clearly, the complexity of instructional leadership, diverse array of influential factors as well as the multiple variables working in combination mandate thoughtful development of the research strategy and design (Leavy, 2017; Mertens, 2015).

The changing role and expectations of principals necessitates careful consideration in the research design strategy and process. The numerous internal and external influential factors associated with effective instructional leadership and professional development necessitate focused examination. For these reasons, this study employs a qualitative research design with structured interviews.

A basic qualitative research design was utilized in this study because the research questions focused on principals' perceptions of effective professional development programs, principal professional development needs, and learning environment preferences.

Strauss and Corbin (2015) assert that utilizing qualitative research methodology is particularly powerful in describing the meaning research participants associate with their own lived experiences. This research strategy enabled individual principal's rich personal reflection on their own experiences and professional development needs to be collected

and compared with other participants in the research study (Creswell, 2018; Strauss & Corbin, 2015; Leavy, 2017; Mertens, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Saldana & Omasta, 2018).

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy of principals and district instructional leaders serving within two public K-12 school districts in South Carolina. Fifty-eight principals and district leaders serving within two large school districts were asked if they would be willing to share their perspective in individual research interviews. Nine out of the 58 principals and district leaders elected to participate in this study.

The research participants shared two critical characteristics which met the inclusion criteria for the research study, including holding a role as a principal or district leader at the time of the study and participation in cohort-based professional development within the last year. Percy, Kostere, and Kostere (2015) assert that even a research sample that is small may provide great insight and information on the research topic.

This study utilized nine structured individual interviews with current principals and district instructional leaders in public K-12 educational settings. The study's purpose and two overarching two research questions guided the construction of the interview questions. The interview questions were designed as structured, open-ended questions prompting participants to reflect upon their experiences and to describe their experiences and insights in their own terminology.

The open-ended question design also encouraged research participants to elaborate on their own perceptions of effective principal professional development programs, ongoing

professional development needs, and learning environment preferences. By purposefully constructing the interview questions to be open-ended, drawing upon the research literature, and aligning each interview question with one of the study's research questions, the researchers ensured the interview questions were relevant and appropriate (Strauss & Corbin, 2015).

Throughout each research interview, questions were utilized to gain a better understanding and gain insight regarding the factors influencing perceptions about professional development offerings. The interview questions focused upon four important areas including, characteristics of effective principal professional development programs, influence on instructional leadership practices, learning environment preferences, and top professional development needs that would be helpful in their roles as principals.

In this research study, each interview was recorded on video for transcription to increase data trustworthiness (Creswell, 2018). The interviews were all conducted utilizing video conferencing software over a four-week span of time.

Research participants

The participants in this study included nine principals and district instructional leaders serving within two public K-12 school districts in South Carolina. Each of the participants had recently participated in principal professional development sessions within the preceding 12 months.

The participants in this study were diverse in years of educational leadership experience, race and ethnicity, and gender, increasing the likelihood of the representativeness of the sample to be generalizable to a wider population of K-12

educational leaders. Pseudonyms are used throughout the study for each of the research participants.

Data analysis

Creswell (2018) states, "The process of data analysis involves making sense out of text and image data. It involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data."

Following the completion of the first research interview, the researchers utilized a thematic, constant-comparison analysis (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Using a thematic analytic strategy, the researchers engaged in multiple stages of coding, classifying, and clustering words to ensure saturation was reached and to better understand developing themes, categories, and patterns about principals' perceptions about effective principal professional development, ongoing professional development needs, and learning environment preferences (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The researchers frequently revisited the interview data utilizing the constant comparison analysis. This inductive analysis led to four themes emerging from the data that answered the study's two overarching research questions and provided insight into the professional development perceptions of principals.

While the coding was immensely beneficial during data analysis, an analysis of published research literature was also a valuable component of the analysis process. Previous research literature on instructional leadership and professional development was instrumental in assessing the data collected in

this research study and evaluating the research findings on the context of the current literature on instructional leadership. Research literature assisted in better understanding emerging themes and patterns in the research findings and helped in corroborating the study's findings.

Results

Principals and district instructional leaders who participated in this study answered a variety of interview questions designed to generate great insight regarding the following two overarching research questions: How do principals and district instructional leaders describe effective

principal professional development? How do principals and district instructional leaders describe current and future principal professional development needs?

All the participants interviewed in this research study expressed the need for continued instructional leadership professional development. Research participant responses were strikingly similar despite differences in years of experience, gender, and race and ethnicity. Participant pseudonyms and demographics are provided in Table 1 which illustrates the participant pseudonyms, years of principal experience, gender, and race.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Characteristics

Participants (n=9)	Principal Experience	Gender and Race
Robert	2 Years	Male, Caucasian
Scott	3 Years	Male, African American
Janet	30 Years	Female, Caucasian
Phillip	10 Years	Male, Caucasian
Megan	30 Years	Female, Caucasian
Penny	25 Years	Female, African American
Melanie-Lee	9 Years	Female, African American
Lucy	2 Years	Female, Caucasian
Andrea	1 Year	Female, African American

An analysis of the data generated in the individual interviews highlights that participants view four key factors as central to the effectiveness of principal professional development programs: the desire for a focus on practical application of learning, utilization of a systems approach, ability to address

knowledge gaps, and the opportunity to participate within a community of practice. The following sections elaborate on the data gained relating to each of the aforementioned factors to provide insight into the details influencing principals' professional development perceptions.

Focus on practical application of learning

During the individual interviews, all nine principals and district instructional leaders communicated the importance and value of focusing on practical applications for the learning generated through principal professional development programs. Therefore, 100% percent of the research participants in this sample viewed practicality and the ability to put their learning directly into practice as paramount in their perception of program effectiveness. The desire for a practical versus theoretical focus is represented by the comments of a current principal highlighted below:

When asked what made professional development offerings effective and useful, Robert who serves as a middle school principal, stated “useful, real-world experience.” He further elaborated: Practicality of answers ... we are not just living in a theoretical world. There’s a time and place for theory, but that’s not helpful to a person who is in the ranks and just needs to get it done. It’s a lot of thinking and thinking outside the box, but I need a practical solution to our issues here.

Megan, a district instructional leader, reinforced this sentiment noting “application was the most important thing” and it was valuable to “have a bag of tricks for delivery of curriculum.” Phillip, a veteran high school principal, further described the value of participating in “practical hands-on learning,” stating: You have to make us do stuff. I think if we sit and get, you lose a little bit. Putting us in clusters, making us do a needs assessment and discussing data with our peers, just give us tasks to do.

Similarly, Lucy who serves as a middle school principal with two years of experience, stated: Here’s what you could do right now when you go back to your school. If we are not walking away with something we can use with immediacy, then it feels like as a principal that you may have been able to find the information elsewhere. And what I mean by that is it’s really, really important for us to be able to keep all these spinning plates in the air and feel like when we are brought to a session of professional development that the session needs to be what you can literally walk away with.

Likewise, Andrea, a new middle school principal notes the importance of professional development that “models how it could look like in practice.”

Janet, a veteran district instructional leader highlights the value of having professional development that is “concrete with tangible things we can do and that we can systemize.”

Another veteran district instructional leader, Penny, offers “for me as an adult learner, I want instruction to be applicable to what I’m doing.”

Utilization of systems approach

Utilizing a systems approach was a second characteristic of effective principal professional development that emerged as being influential throughout the individual interviews. It is interesting to note that the majority of the research participants, seven out of nine interviewees, identified the importance of having a “framework,” or “systems approach” in which to view the professional development learning:

The influence of the desire for a framework to contextualize their learning is evident in the following interview excerpt from Janet, a veteran district instructional leader: If you don’t have a system in place, then number one, you are working too hard. Number two, you don’t know where you are going, how you are going to get there, and how it’s going to be received by who you are working with. A systematic approach to every single part of your job—it can be detrimental if you are not doing it, but if you are it can also be extremely advantageous.

Lucy, a second-year middle school principal, describes instructional leadership as “layered ... there are layers that are really important as a leader in conducting holistic review of your school.”

Similarly, Melanie-Lee, an experienced high school principal also notes the importance of professional development considering “what systems you have in place.”

This sentiment was also expressed by Scott, a third-year high school principal who noted the value of professional development in “providing a model or framework of how to improve.”

Robert, a second-year middle school principal, noted the role of professional development in helping to “establish principal leadership protocols.”

Ability to address knowledge gaps

A third major characteristic of effective principal professional development programs identified was the ability for the principal professional development to address perceived knowledge gaps. Although, in many cases this category appears similar to the focus on practical application of learning category, all of the principals’ statements included in this category focus on perceived gaps from professional practice, their graduate preparation programs, as well as the desire for additional knowledge and skill development. The majority of the interview respondents mentioned a desire for professional development to strengthen their preparation and skills in “teaching teachers” under their supervision:

This sentiment is highlighted in the following statement by Megan, a veteran district instructional leader, who describes principal professional development as an activity that “opens a door for more change.” She also notes principals “need better unpacking of the standards and knowing what effective teaching looks like.”

Principals elaborated on current and future professional development needs as a means of addressing knowledge gaps in multiple areas, including the use of data to inform instruction, elements of instructional supervision, and progress monitoring:

For example, Robert, a second-year middle school principal, states one of the keys to all three areas is “knowing what to progress monitor” and further explains the skills principals need to develop in the following excerpt: You have to take your managerial hat off and be an instructional leader. A lot of administrators when they become assistant principals or principals come out of the classroom so early they haven’t really mastered pedagogy in their own classrooms. Then they are nine years removed. I’m nine years removed from the classroom and it’s very easy to forget. It’s easy to become old school because you are not in it anymore. I almost think that I need to teach a class every three or four years just to remember what it’s like to be a teacher in the ranks, and what it means to give a learning objective, what it means to refer back to your learning objective and your standard three or four times for the 4.0 rubric, and how to have good classroom management ... forces us to think like a teacher how to use data, how to be a good progress monitor.

Phillip, an experienced high school principal also shares: You have to support your teachers. You have to do everything in your power to help them. If they need help with data ... If they need help with resources, you have to be there working shoulder to shoulder with them.

Reflecting on progress monitoring, Phillip also asserts: We need to do a better job as instructional leaders in looking at the observational data as a leadership team and looking at patterns and trends that we see in observations ... I’d like to see more technology involved a little bit, creating things more with devices. We have the technology, so our instructional practices are now shifting to the 21st century. Everyone is mostly one-to-one, so we can start shifting instructional practices with professional development.

Similarly, Janet, a veteran district instructional leader describes: [Principals] know it’s important to observe and evaluate teachers, but they never really were given specific strategies on how that happens, what do I need to do, what systems do I need to put in place.

Melanie-Lee, an experienced high school principal, reflects: Using data. I think a lot of people are fearful of data. I say fear stands for false evidence of appearing real. Data doesn’t lie. So, if it’s there, it’s there. The problem with some people is they don’t know which data to look at and they get overwhelmed with the data instead of looking at the data to drive their decisions.

Participation within a community of practice

Most principals expressed the desire to participate in professional development within a community of practice, noting the effectiveness of district cohort models. Study participants highlighted several advantages afforded by the cohort model, including a shared vested interest in their own schools, common community, and context as a foundation for learning, and the ability to extend the learning gained through continuation of practice and reinforcement in the school environment following professional development sessions. The majority of principals also noted the desire to address these

perceived knowledge gaps through professional development learning pathways rather than additional graduate coursework.

Robert, a second-year middle school principal, illustrates the effectiveness of professional development within a community of practice through the following statement: Collaboration that I had with my colleagues while doing it at the same time. That was very invaluable. Just being able to talk in the same district, with the same people, all learning at the same time the same things. Being able to see what other schools were doing, how they were doing it, what they weren't doing ... realizing I was ok, it was ok, we were going to learn this together. I really appreciated the collaborative piece of it.

Robert also shared: [It] helps to have colleagues doing it together. The cohort model is good because we were all there and experienced the same things. I have a vested interest in my school. For me, this was a personal journey. I wanted to do this for my school.

Similarly, Megan, a veteran district instructional leader, reports: [The] cohort model lent for trust with the principals being together. Principals amongst principals talk differently if there's an AP or someone else in the room.

Phillip, an experienced high school principal also highlighted the value of "sharing ideas" and having "collaborative conversations with other principals and district staff."

Lucy, a second-year middle school principal explains that professional development enables her to "continue to grow as a leader in my building with my needs at the forefront."

Janet, a veteran district instructional leader describes that PD enables one to "capture a larger audience and you can also, if you train people well enough, it can spread throughout the rest of the school district."

Likewise, Andrea, a new middle school principal stated: "Conversations with each other about what is going on. Open dialogue and communication within the school, between schools, and between schools and districts."

When asked about future professional development needs, most of the research participants highlighted the need for on-site coaching and expanding professional development to include an interdisciplinary team within the school environment.

For example, Robert, a second-year middle school principal, recommended "integrating teachers within some of the professional development sessions with principals" as well as "onsite coaching."

Similarly, Phillip, an experienced high school principal, noted the need to utilize a team-based PD approach that included

Having assistant principals, curriculum and instruction professionals, and coaches involved in the professional development. Doing observations as a team to blend perspectives and come from the same instructional focus by taking learning walks with the principal, assistant principal, and learning coach.

Illustrating a multidisciplinary team-based approach to coaching and professional development, Scott, a third-year high school principal, stated: A good lesson plan is like a playbook. You want everyone on the same page in regard to the plays. If you know what is going on and they know what's going on then, you can provide quality feedback because everyone is on the same page, but if you are going in blind on the playbook then it's hard to give quality feedback.

Discussion

This research takes an important step to draw attention to the needs of principals. As principals' jobs have evolved and the demands on the principalship have increased, principals need continued support to meet those demands (Rowland, 2017; Zepeda, Parylo & Bengston, 2014). Principal and district participants in a 12-month professional development series found four key factors as central to the effectiveness of principal professional development: the desire for a focus on practical application of learning, utilization of a systems approach, ability to address knowledge gaps, and the opportunity to participate within a community of practice. The study also proved that principals continue to need professional development beyond their principal preparation programs as noted by the desire for extended learning opportunities by all participants.

Furthermore, these findings support Wenger's (2011) CoP theoretical framework for best practice in professional development. In a CoP, participants engage in school improvement together as committed partners who aim to problem solve and address knowledge gaps. In the CoP established in the year-long professional learning program, participants were able to directly apply the

learning to specific school settings, and the job-embedded cohort style of CoP provided the time and opportunity for shared learning (Haar, 2004). Another advantage of a district CoP is that schools can work to achieve district goals as one unit rather than leaving each school leader to "figure it out."

As a result of the study, district leaders may want to rethink the purpose of principal meetings or consider creating CoP's to further engage principals in professional learning. Additionally, district leaders need to take note of the learning gaps that exist within their own districts to provide proper support and equip principals with the tools necessary for success.

Future research should focus on principal CoP's as well as the added element of coaching/mentoring. Principal participants expressed the desire for follow up with on-site assistance when working with leadership teams. Hayes (2019) expressed the importance of coaching for novice principals, but this study proves that tenured principals alike need the continued development and support. Coaching along with a CoP may serve to provide wrap-around services and close the knowledge gaps that exist within the various stages of the principalship.

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