

Practical and Timely: The Journals Public School Principals Read

Benterah C. Morton, PhD
President
Perspectives Education and Leadership Consulting
Houston, TX

Matt Townsley, EdD
Associate Professor
Educational Leadership
University of Northern Iowa
Cedar Falls, IA

Abstract

This study involving 280 public school principals within ten states sought to identify the types of educational journals school principals read. The findings indicate that the majority of principals are reading practical and timely publications provided by professional organizations rather than peer-reviewed journals. *Educational Leadership*, *Education Week*, *NASSP Bulletin* and *AASA's The School Administrator* were the most frequently read periodicals.

Key Words

principals, educational leadership, educational administration, journals, research utilization

Introduction

School principals in US schools play a vital role in curating the school environment. This curation includes processes that involve selecting content-specific certified educators, evaluating, and training these educators and keeping abreast of cutting-edge strategies to guide student achievement. Amid all the roles and expectations placed on school leaders, when do principals have time to update their knowledge and skills? What is more, where do school leaders go to update their knowledge and skills? In many states, school leaders have access to regional education resource centers that provide professional development and training that keeps principals up to date with fresh ideas and ways of leading. Although regional education resource centers offer a wealth of support, they do not provide clear insight into what school principals read for self-development aside from what is offered during professional development sessions.

Amid the numerous forms of information school principals need to review daily to keep abreast of student achievement and student safety it is important to do so on an ongoing basis. Considering the wealth of national and international events that pose potential obstacles to student safety and academic engagement, where are school principals going to find the cutting-edge material with which to curate a safe school environment and facilitate lifelong learning? The current investigation replicates a similar study which sought to understand the publications practicing public school superintendents read (Author & Author, 2022).

The results from Townsley, M & Morton, B.C. (2022) suggest public school superintendents do not often read peer-reviewed journals and most frequently read *Educational Leadership*, *The School Administrator*, *Education Week*, and *The*

American School Board Journal, which are provided by professional and trade organizations. Departing Townsley, M & Morton, B.C. (2022), the current study narrows the focus from district-wide leadership - superintendents to campus-level leadership - school principals. More specifically, the study highlights the importance of exploring the sources of practitioner reading resources as a function of identifying avenues for maximizing scholars' data-informed influence on practitioner behaviors and outcomes.

The overarching aim of many scholarly focused educational leadership consortia (e.g., ICPEL, UCEA) focuses on "building knowledge for the field and providing quality preparation and lifelong learning experiences for school and school system leaders" (UCEA, 2025). However, there is little known about the impact these types of organizations and the scholarly work produced by their members have on school principals. In a time of seemingly increasing stressors on principals caused by national and international events (i.e., COVID-19, political extremism, racial tension, etc.) it has become necessary to assess where school leaders are reading to support their development and decision making.

Moreover, are the sources they are reading providing the context and tools necessary to meet the actively changing landscape of education, including but not limited to the needs of diverse populations of students, and filling glaring gaps of education disequity illuminated by current world events (e.g., access to computers; internet connectivity; healthcare disparities; wage disparities, etc.)? While this research does not seek to respond to all of these indicators of a changing landscape, it does explore where leaders, specifically public-school principals in the United States of America, were going to figure out how to get help during the height of

the COVID-19 pandemic (October 2020 - April 2021).

Building on the work of Townsley, M & Morton, B.C. (2022), (school principals) reading resources within peer reviewed journals and editor reviewed journals. Going beyond Townsley, M & Morton, B.C.'s (2022) acknowledgement of the necessity to bridge the gap between educational leadership scholars and practitioners, we provide aspects of the foundational knowledge necessary to begin responding to the seemingly unanswered calls within the literature for more professional development for practitioners (see Walker et al., 2021). Moreover, the study employs a conceptual framework that informs why leaders appear to gravitate to practitioner journals instead of research journals.

Literature Review

Townsley, M & Morton, B.C. (2022) suggest district-level leaders prioritize reading practitioner-based publications to peer reviewed journals. This study tangentially responds to that call while focusing on campus-level school leaders. Research utilization provides the lens through which this study theorizes the impetus behind school principals' search for theoretical and practical sources to support their quest to benefit schools and the children they serve.

Research Utilization

A review of extant literature illuminated that research utilization, while used to explore various types of social science research and leadership through public policy, has few published connections with school leadership. Perhaps this is due to the seeming ambiguity of the term as noted by Weiss (1979). To make clear the term, Weiss (1979) collated seven different images of the processes and purposes of utilization: the knowledge-driven model, the problem-solving model, the interactive model, the political model, the tactical model, the

enlightenment model, and research as a part of the intellectual enterprise of the society. It is Weiss' (1979) interactive model that is most applicable to this work. In this model interlocutors seek to respond to issues by engaging multiple sources beyond simple research methods. For this study the interlocutors are represented by school principals across the United States of America who are seeking to enhance their practice using practitioner focused literature in lieu of engaging solely with empirical research published in top tier research journals. Likewise, this study replicates the methodology of Townsley, M & Morton, B.C. (2022) to grasp more concretely the use of educational leadership journals for the specific use of education leadership practitioners.

For clarity, we acknowledge that formal, peer-reviewed educational leadership scholarship has a place in influencing policy development and the actions of leadership practitioners. At the same time, we challenge the notion that there is a direct relationship between the readership of top tier research journals and leadership practitioners. As noted by Townsley, M & Morton, B.C. (2022) school superintendents across the United States report reading practitioner focused journals instead of top tier research journals. This study ascribes to the approach of Weiss (1979) by challenging educational leadership scholars to identify ways to make their research more accessible and relevant to the practitioners in the field.

Practical Applications

Since before the first educational doctorate (Ed.D.) was awarded at Harvard University in 1922 (Lagemann, 2000) there have been questions about the role of education scholars in the lives of education leadership practitioners. Shulman et al. (2006) echo concern for the seemingly *confused purpose* of the educational doctorate and doctorate in philosophy (Ph.D.) in education that have led to

unclear distinctions between the two terminal degrees. For this article, we distinguish the two degrees by placing them into complementary worldviews. The Ed.D. is situated within the worldview of the practitioner with its focus in preparing high level practitioners that are equipped to lead from within the field. Simultaneously, the Ph.D. is situated within the worldview of the researcher centered on developing education scholars that are equipped to inform educational practices through high quality, theory informed, peer reviewed, explorations. In a very basic comparison, practitioners are more in line with the Ed.D. worldview compared to Ph.D. worldview (see Shulman, 2006).

Contrasting these two worldviews provides a pathway for exploring the interplay between the roles of the scholar and the practitioner in actualizing educational goals geared toward student engagement and achievement. Educational Leadership practitioners (i.e., principles, superintendents, building, and district level leaders) across the United States possess both practitioner focused, and research focused terminal degrees in education.

At the same time, they often support the research of educational leadership scholars, whereas educational leadership scholars support the practice of educational leadership practitioners. While this represents the dependent interplay between the two worldviews, there are obstacles to this occurring in practice (see Levine, 2007; McClintock, 2005; Shulman et al., 2006). More recently Braun (2023) and Fraser et al. (2020) and others illuminated similar obstacles. While Fraser et al. (2020) challenged the relevance of academic research to practitioners within business, similar questions are echoed in education (Townsend, M & Morton, B.C. (2022); Braun, 2023) and other fields. Some

scholars challenge the incongruence of language between scholars and practitioners (Conaway, 2013), while others challenge the notion that the information intended to enrich the field actually makes it to practitioners (Williams & Coles, 2007). Still others challenge the pace of decision making and sensemaking of leaders (Morton & Delmas, 2022; Morton et al. 2020; Schildkamp, 2019). Amid these challenges to the interplay between education leadership scholars and practitioners, there is hope. Walker et al., (2021) position professional development as an avenue to navigate these and other challenges.

This study does not answer the question: Why are school principals drawn to practitioner-based journals? Instead, the work provides valuable insights for practitioners and scholars in educational leadership to consider as we identify and chart new ways of overcoming the challenges that confine the effectiveness of the interplay between the two worldviews.

Methods

Drawing upon parallel procedures from the previous study focused on district-level leaders (Townsend, M & Morton, B.C. (2022), the population of this study consists of all school principals in the contiguous 48 United States of America. To obtain a representative sample of principals, the states were divided into six regions: Pacific, Rocky Mountain, Southwest, Midwest, Southeast, and Northeast. Two states were selected from each region: Oregon and Washington (Pacific); Montana and Wyoming (Rocky Mountain); New Mexico and Oklahoma (Southwest); Iowa and North Dakota (Midwest); Arkansas and South Carolina (Southeast); and New Hampshire and New Jersey (Northeast). All public-school principals in these states were sent a survey to understand the professional publications they read, based upon a list of 29 possible journals.

Survey

For this exploratory descriptive study, the researchers developed a twelve-question survey which asked participants to share demographic information including highest degree obtained, year of earning their highest degree, year earning their leadership credential, years as a K-12 administrator, years in current role, gender, and race. In addition, participants were asked to indicate up to five journals in the area of educational administration/leadership that they most frequently read. To cast the widest possible net, the researchers first included all journals listed more than once from within several different sources.

First, to ensure that we considered the journals most widely cited by educational leadership faculty, we looked at the top 25 journals cited in each of *EAQ* and *JSL* from 2000 to 2007 as noted in Richardson & McLeod (2009). Next, to ensure our list was up to date, we consulted the top 20 educational

administration journals according to Google Scholar on February 2, 2020. Finally, we consulted the only available known report of journals practicing school leaders read (Anderson et al. 2005). In addition to journals listed more than once within Richardson and McLeod's (2009) two lists and Google Scholar's lists, we included any journal that was solely listed in the Anderson et al. (2005) survey for comparison purposes. We did not include the journal, *School Foodservice and Nutrition*, from the Anderson et al. (2005) list because it no longer appears to be published.

Table 1 provides a list of the 29 journals included in the survey. In addition to selecting from the provided list, participants were also able to write in the name(s) of up to three journal(s) for choices not listed. To answer this study's research questions, only the questions regarding highest degree obtained, gender, race, and journals read were used in the data analysis.

Table 1

List of Educational Leadership Journals Included in the Survey

Journals	Cited in
Administrative Science Quarterly	EAQ, JSL
American Educational Research Journal (AERJ)	EAQ, JSL, Anderson
American School Board Journal (ASBJ)	JSL, Anderson
Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning	Anderson
Education and Urban Society	EAQ, JSL, ELJ
Education Week	EAQ, JSL
Educational Administration Quarterly (EAQ)	EAQ, JSL, ELJ
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis	EAQ, JSL

Educational Leadership	EAQ, JSL, ELJ, Anderson
Educational Policy	EAQ, ELJ
Educational Researcher	EAQ, JSL
Elementary School Journal	EAQ, JSL
Harvard Educational Review (HER)	EAQ, JSL, Anderson
International Journal of Leadership in Education	JSL, ELJ
Journal of Applied Psychology	EAQ, JSL
Journal of Educational Administration (JEA)	EAQ, JSL, ELJ
Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education	EAQ, JSL
Journal of School Leadership (JSL)	EAQ, JSL, ELJ
NASSP Bulletin	JSL, Anderson
National Forum of Educational Administration and Supervision	Anderson
Phi Delta Kappan (PDK)	EAQ, JSL, ELJ
Review of Educational Research	EAQ, JSL
School Effectiveness and School Improvement	EAQ, JSL, ELJ
Teachers College Record	EAQ, JSL
Techniques: Connecting Education and Careers	Anderson
The Learning Professional (Formerly: Journal of Staff Development)	Anderson
The School Administrator	JSL, Anderson
Trusteeship	Anderson
Urban Education	EAQ, JSL

Note. EAQ = journals cited within EAQ as noted in Richardson & McLeod (2009), JSL = journals cited with JSL as noted in Richardson & McLeod (2009), ELJ = journals within top 20 educational leadership journals according to Google Scholar on February 2, 2020, Anderson = journals noted in Anderson et al. (2005).

Data collection and analysis

The research team obtained a total of 11,575 principal email addresses from the respective state department of education web sites. Principals in these twelve states were sent an institutional research board approved query inviting them to participate in the study during Fall 2020 or Spring 2021. A reminder email was sent to all participants at two and four-week increments. Of these email addresses, 619 of them were duplicates and 750 of them were no longer valid, leaving 10,206 potential participants. A total of 396 participants started the survey; however, upon review, 280 surveys (2.74% usable response rate) were fully completed following the data collection period.

In addition, the low response rate may be attributed to principals navigating an undoubtedly demanding and chaotic school year stemming from a global pandemic (Harris & Jones, 2020). Given the context of this investigation, one limitation may be that those that do not regularly read journals chose not to participate and are therefore underrepresented in this data set.

Table 2 describes the gender and highest degree obtained of the participating principals. Some participants wrote in the names of journals that were noted in the list; therefore, the research team re-tabulated and verified the results after exporting them from the electronic survey platform.

Table 2

Gender and Highest Degree Obtained of Principals

Degree	Female	Male	Total
Masters	83	112	196*
Specialist	23	23	46
Doctorate	26	12	38
Total	132	147	280*

*Note: One participant identified as non-binary, and this data was only included in the overall totals.

Results

The 280 principals participating in this investigation read a total of 71 unique journals.

The number of occurrences for any particular journal ranged from one to 189.

Table 3 presents the distribution of the top 10 journals in descending order, starting

with the journals most often read by all principals.

Table 3

Journals Read by All Principals (n=280)

Journal	Number (Percentage) of Participants Reading Each Journal
Educational Leadership	189 (67.5%)
Education Week	166 (59.3%)
NASSP Bulletin	88 (31.4%)
The School Administrator	75 (26.8%)
Phi Delta Kappan	24 (8.6%)
American Educational Research Journal	19 (6.8%)
Educational Administration Quarterly	17 (6.1%)
Harvard Educational Review	14 (5%)
Principal Magazine (NAESP)	12 (4.3%)
Journal of School Leadership	11 (3.9%)
Other journals combined (n=61)	141 (50.4%)
I do not frequently read educational leadership journals	28 (10%)

Tables 4, 5, 6, and 7 present the distribution of the top 10 journals read by male principals, female principals, principals with a doctorate degree, and principals with a master's or specialist degree, respectively.

In each of these tables, the percentages add up to more than 100%, because participants could select *up to* five journals. *Educational*

Leadership, Education Week, NASSP Bulletin, School Administrator were read most often within each subgroup. *Phi Delta Kappan* was the fifth most frequently read publication overall and among all of the different subgroups. Male principals noted reading *Educational Administration Quarterly* at the same rate as *Phi Delta Kappan*.

Table 4*Journals Read by Male Principals (n=147)*

Journal	Number (Percentage) of Participants Reading Each Journal
Educational Leadership	97 (66%)
Education Week	79 (53.7%)
NASSP Bulletin	51 (34.7%)
The School Administrator	43 (29.3%)
Educational Administration Quarterly	13 (8.8%)
Phi Delta Kappan	13 (8.8%)
American Educational Research Journal	10 (6.8%)
American School Board Journal	8 (5.4%)
Journal of Educational Administration	6 (4.1%)
Educational Policy	5 (3.4%)
Harvard Educational Review	5 (3.4%)
Journal of School Leadership	5 (3.4%)
Principal Magazine (NAESP)	5 (3.4%)
Other journals combined (n=38)	56 (38.1%)
I do not frequently read educational leadership journals	16 (10.9%)

Table 5*Journals Read by Female Principals (n=132)*

Journal	Number (Percentage) of Participants Reading Each Journal
Educational Leadership	91 (68.9%)
Education Week	86 (65.2%)
NASSP Bulletin	37 (28%)
The School Administrator	31 (23.5%)
Phi Delta Kappan	11 (8.3%)
American Educational Research Journal	9 (6.8%)
Harvard Educational Review	9 (6.8%)
Principal Magazine (NAESP)	7 (5.3%)
School Effectiveness and School Improvement	6 (4.5%)
Journal of School Leadership	5 (3.8%)
The Marshall Memo	5 (3.8%)
Other journals combined (n=34)	58 (43.9%)
I do not frequently read educational leadership journals	12 (9.1%)

Table 6*Journals Read by Principals with a Doctorate Degree (n=38)*

Journal	Number (Percentage) of Participants Reading Each Journal
Educational Leadership	32 (84.2%)
Education Week	23 (60.5%)
NASSP Bulletin	12 (31.6%)
The School Administrator	11 (28.9%)
Phi Delta Kappan	9 (23.7%)
American Educational Research Journal	5 (13.2%)
Educational Administration Quarterly	3 (7.9%)
Educational Policy	3 (7.9%)
Review of Educational Research	3 (7.9%)
Principal Magazine (NAESP)	3 (7.9%)
Other journals combined (n=27)	25 (65.8%)
I do not frequently read educational leadership journals	2 (5.3%)

Table 7

Journals Read by Principals with a Masters or Specialist Degree (n=242)

Journal	Number (Percentage) of Participants Reading Each Journal
Educational Leadership	157 (64.9%)
Education Week	143 (59.1%)
NASSP Bulletin	76 (31.4%)
The School Administrator	64 (26.4%)
Phi Delta Kappan	15 (6.2%)
American Educational Research Journal	14 (5.8%)
Educational Administration Quarterly	14 (5.8%)
Harvard Educational Review	12 (5.0%)
American School Board Journal	10 (4.1%)
Journal of School Leadership	9 (3.7%)
Principal Magazine (NAESP)	9 (3.7%)
Other journals combined (n=46)	104 (43.0%)
I do not frequently read educational leadership journals	26 (10.7%)

Discussion

Educational Leadership, *Education Week*, *NASSP Bulletin* and *The School Administrator* were the top four publications read by all principals, male principals, female principals, principals with a doctoral degree, and principals with a master's or specialist degree; however, the fifth most widely read publication differed slightly among the subgroups, and only by a few percentages. Only one of these publications, *NASSP Bulletin*, is peer-reviewed

and provided to members of the National Association of Secondary Schools Principals, with the remaining three publications being editor-reviewed. Among these editor-reviewed publications, *Educational Leadership* is a member benefit of the professional organization, ASCD, and *The School Administrator* is a member benefit of AASA, the school superintendents' association. Principals are often busy devoting their time to the daily management of the school; therefore,

they may not regularly have time to devote to thoughtful and reflective reading (Fusarelli, 2008). Because of their affiliation with professional or member-driven organizations, *Educational Leadership*, *NASSP Bulletin*, and *The School Administrator* may be more readily available for principals to pick up from their email inboxes or mailboxes and read when opportunities arise. Similarly, *Phi Delta Kappan* magazine, the fifth most widely read publication overall and among all subgroups except for males, is a member benefit of PDK International.

In addition, there were only subtle differences among the journals read by each subgroup. While 67.5% of all principals, 66% of male principals, 68.9% of female principals read *Educational Leadership*. Despite not being listed on the survey, 12 principals wrote-in that they read *Principal Magazine*, which is a member benefit for the National Association of Elementary School Principals. The top peer-reviewed journal on the list, *NASSP Bulletin*, is read by 34.7% of principals, and this journal is a (NASSP) member benefit. This may add further support to the idea that busy school leaders are more likely to read publications provided by professional organizations. During the timeframe of this study, school leaders were experiencing unprecedented challenges stemming from COVID-19 that may not be discussed in formal academic journals; therefore, they may have found themselves clinging even more tightly to editor-reviewed (and often more practitioner-oriented) publications that have a stronger potential for providing timely insights for school leaders. This finding is not surprising given that Townsley, M & Morton, B.C. (2022) also found that public school superintendents were also more likely to read publications provided by professional organizations.

Weiss' (1979) interactive model of research utilization suggests that school leaders

seek to respond to issues by engaging multiple sources beyond simple research methods. During the global pandemic in which the study took place, school leaders were making decisions with little experience to draw upon. The dearth of experience, timeliness in which decisions needed to be made, coupled with the lag time of peer-reviewed research from data collection to publication, may have forced the hand of school leaders to rely upon shorter form practitioner publications. Indeed, the school leaders represented in the current study may have been searching for timely guidance, regardless of the source, during this unprecedented time period.

One additional aim of this study was to expand upon the Anderson et al. (2005) report conducted nearly twenty years ago. *Educational Leadership* was the most frequently read publication in the current study as well as the comparison report. Furthermore, nearly one third of principals in the current study indicate they read *NASSP Bulletin* and over half read *The School Administrator*, which were noted in the Anderson et al. (2005) paper. One notable difference is *Education Week* which was read by over half of the principals in the current study but was not on the list of twelve journals provided to participants in Anderson et al. (2005) despite being around since 1981. Similar to *Educational Leadership* and *School Administrator*, *Education Week* provides a timely and practitioner-friendly look at K-12 education trends, which may explain its growing readership in the current study, despite not being a benefit of a professional or trade organization.

One notable difference between the journals read by principals in the current study and the journals read by superintendents (Author & Author, 2022) is *The American School Board Journal* (ASBJ). Over one fourth of public-school superintendents report reading ASBJ (Townsley, M & Morton, B.C. (2022), while

nearly six percent of male principals in the current study reported reading ASBJ. Given the focus of ASBJ, one might expect principals, who do not often work directly with their school boards, to read this publication less often. One reason male principals may read ASBJ is because they aspire to someday become superintendents. Despite that a majority of teachers are females, male superintendents outnumber females almost two to one (Blad, 2023); therefore, the small number of male principals reading ASBJ compared to female principals generally aligns with current public school superintendency statistics.

The results of this study have implications for educational researchers, particularly those who seek to provide a more immediate impact on the field. With practicality and timeliness at the forefront of their minds, educational leadership scholars would be wise to look beyond writing for tenure or navel gaze and instead to disseminate their ideas to meet the needs of practitioners in editor-reviewed and membership-oriented publications practicing school leaders actually read. While the current study took place during the height of a global pandemic, a significant overlap exists between the journals principals read in 2005 and today, which suggests school leaders have continued to privilege the same practitioner-focused reading over time.

Conclusion

Public school principals participating in this study most frequently read *Educational Leadership*, *Education Week*, *NASSP Bulletin* and AASA's *The School Administrator*. Public school principals in United States schools have been required to wrestle with recent political unrest, social justice events, and other timely current events (e.g. COVID-19 and etc.) affecting the staff and students in their school. Further investigation is needed to understand the ability of educational journals to provide timely resources and evidence-based strategies that school leaders need to curate a safe school environment and facilitate lifelong learning. Additional research is also needed to understand who is authoring the articles in professional and trade periodicals that are influencing practicing school leaders. Regretfully, beginning in 2024, NASSP no longer publishes *NASSP Bulletin*, leaving practicing school leaders with one less publication to read. The journals public school principals read are practical and timely and AASA has a model of both peer-reviewed and practitioner-facing publications that based on the readership of the current study, appears to be one model to navigate the interplay between the practitioner and scholar worldviews.

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Author Biographies

Benterah C Morton, president of Perspectives Education and Leadership Consulting and former associate professor of educational leadership at the University of South Alabama, researches the role of instructional leaders in meeting the needs of diverse populations through mentorship, curriculum and instruction, and leadership preparation. E-mail: benterah@perspectiveseal.com

Matt Townsley, associate professor of educational leadership at University of Northern Iowa. Co-author of *A Parents' Guide to Grading and Reporting: Being Clear about What Matters* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2023) and *Making Grades Matter: Standards-based Grading in a Secondary PLC at Work* (Solution Tree, 2020). E-mail: matt.townsley@uni.edu

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