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MAKING ADMINISTRATIVE INTERNSHIPS MEANINGFUL

By Donald Hackman, Faith S. Russell, and Robert J. Elliott

The role of field-based experiences as an integral component of principal preparation programs has long been advocated within the educational administration profession. During internship experiences, the student applies classroom theory to real-life situations within the local school context. The internship's purpose is "to assure the leadership required to support our schools. Internships can link intellectual competence with outstanding performance, if thoughtfully planned and conducted in stimulating settings" (Milstein, Bobroff, & Restine, 1991, p. 6).

Carefully crafted clinical experiences provide multiple benefits for the student, university, and school district (Milstein et al., 1991). As a result of their immersion in administration, students learn practical applications of classroom knowledge. Through observing field experiences, university personnel can design preparation programs that include opportunities to experience best practices occurring in the field. School personnel can observe and evaluate interns' performance in the work setting while considering them for potential administrative employment.

The typical principal candidate is a part-time student, employed as a fulltime teacher, who is financially unable or unwilling to return to school on a fulltime basis. Consequently, clinical experiences are frequently designed around working students' schedules. As early as 1960, the American Association of School Administrators expressed concern with the competing demands placed on the student, noting many weaknesses in the instructional program could be traced to the part-time student model. It is difficult to provide quality experiences that permit theory-practice connections when the student is juggling employment, graduate study, clinical requirements, and family obligations. Completing internship activities before school, after school, during teacher preparation periods, and/or times when school is not in session makes it improbable that the intern will gain a comprehensive understanding of the principal's multi-faceted role. Frantically shifting between teacher and principal roles limits the intern's effectiveness in either position. Erratic, sometimes unrelated activities reinforce a mindset of going through the motions, as the intern passively logs hours, rather than completing quality experiences designed to fully prepare her/him for administrative challenges.

Over the past decade, educational administration faculties have devoted increased attention to the clinical component as they contemplate the restructuring of principal preparation programs. Underscoring the central role of this experience, Milstein (1993) notes:

The establishment of a more structured set of field experiences for future educational administrators is centrally important to the entire program redesign effort. In particular, efforts must be made to increase the quality of the experience and the time-on-task for the clinical component of the program. (p. 193)

In a survey of member institutions of the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA), Paulter (1990) found internships ranged between 100 and 800-plus clock hours, averaging 280 hours. Institutions participating in the Danforth Principal Preparation Program required an average of 632 hours of field experience, roughly equivalent to one semester of full-time work (Cordeiro, Krueger, Parks, Restine, & Wilton, 1993).

Although numerous publications have documented the importance of the clinical experience, they typically have been authored by professors. This article provides a fresh perspective by reflecting on one field experience by all three central figures in the clinical activity-intern, mentor principal, and supervising professor. The article begins by describing internship requirements used in Illinois, then shares one student's experiences through four "critical incidents" that occurred during her internship placement. Suggestions for mentors, interns, and supervising professors are presented, and the article concludes by providing educational administration faculties with recommendations for improving internship activities.

The Internship Experience

The internship activities described in this article were completed in Illinois. Although clinical experiences are not a required component of this principal licensure program, some students include it as an elective offering, earning three semester credits and completing 144 hours of field-based experiences. In addition to on-site experiences, interns engage in a program of professional readings directly related to their field experiences, compile a journal documenting their activities, write four discussion papers which reflect on critical incidents occurring during the internship, and prepare a portfolio documenting the completion of goals and objectives collaboratively identified for this experience.

As a student in the principal preparation program, Faith Russell selected an internship experience to broaden her understanding of the principal's role. An experienced teacher, Faith was employed as a violence prevention/substance abuse program developer for two school districts. Unlike most teaching assignments, Faith's position permitted a certain amount of flexibility for scheduling her internship hours. Robert Elliott, the mentor principal, was completing his fourth year as a high school principal; this was his first experience serving as an administrative mentor. Donald Hackmann, supervising professor, had previously served as a building-level administrator for 12 years.

Faith's internship placement site was selected because she had taught there earlier and then returned as a Student Assistance Counselor. One of five high schools in a community of approximately 100,000, the school serves a diverse student population of over 1,500. The school's student diversity, administrative structure with shared responsibilities among four building administrators, site-based management, and history of addressing student support needs were all attractive to Faith, since they matched her beliefs about the characteristics of an effective secondary school program. Operating under an administrative team philosophy, Faith worked closely with not only the principal but also the assistant principals during this seven-month field experience.

Faith participated in a variety of administrative experiences during her internship placement, including observing the administrators function in a variety of situations and settings, managing routine administrative procedures, and handling student discipline referrals. To provide an intimate perspective of Faith's experiences, four "critical incidents" are shared below, in Faith's words. These incidents were selected, not because they are significantly different from those typically encountered by secondary school administrators, but because they provided meaningful insights for Faith during her internship placement and help to personalize this internship placement for the reader.

Critical Incident #1

After a general orientation, my mentor invited me to a closed meeting the evening of my first day. The superintendent and high school administrators were meeting with the parents of several students whose suspected gang involvement had resulted in numerous disruptive activities at school. When I arrived at the meeting, my immediate observation was that the students and parents were minorities, and all but one administrators were not.

The superintendent, who facilitated the meeting, experienced difficulty getting all participants to honor the rules of order. The parents were upset. Although each parent who attended the meeting had arrived with the goal of preventing their child from being disciplined, the parents did not present a united front. Each was vocally and vehemently advocating for his/her child, most often at the expense of the other students, and their suspicion of the other parents and the district administrators was apparent. They charged the other students with gang involvement, accused the administrators of inadequate discipline, and intimated that race played a role in the identification of their children as gang members.

No outcome could have been mutually satisfactory to everyone involved in that meeting. Yet, oddly enough, each person seemed to leave that meeting with a common conclusion--You can't talk to those people.

Critical Incident #2

Midway through my internship my mentor assigned me the responsibility of substitute administrator during the absence of two assistant principals, who were presenting at a four-day national conference. I was provided with the office used by one of the administrators and her walkie-talkie. I had mixed feelings about this assignment. Although I was pleased for the opportunity to be an acting administrator and intimately involved in the school ~ operations, I was uncertain as to what this meant. I had observed several disciplinary sessions the assistant principal had conducted. I had listened to her describe her approach to a teacher evaluation she was completing. She was the sponsor of a program I was trying to develop for attendance improvement. Yet, I knew little about her daily responsibilities or how she approached them.

On the first morning that I occupied her chair as the official substitute assistant principal, I did little more than sit. At one point, an attendance secretary asked if I knew how to process attendance referrals. "No," I answered simply, and my inadequacy was confirmed. I had not been trained to use the district's computer attendance program.

One assistant principal duty that I knew how to do was to hold the walkie-talkie and stand in the Student Center during passing time between classes. During the four days of my substitution, I did not miss a passing time. I tried to speak with students and faculty as they walked by on their way to their next class, but most students wondered

who I was and why I was there. This was one of my more awkward internship experiences.

Critical Incident #3

The assistant principals and I were enjoying a calm lunch in the faculty cafeteria when an extracurricular sponsor hurried in, looking for the administrators. She needed their advice regarding an incident the evening before. During practice the previous afternoon, one of the students had participated in a crude and vulgar act. (in the interests of student confidentiality, the exact nature of the offense will not be described.) The sponsor had initially informed the student he would only need to write a letter of apology, but now she was having second thoughts. The three administrators agreed a more stringent response was necessary and decided to consult the principal for his opinion.

We marched to my mentor's office with purpose. After learning the situation, he agreed a stronger consequence was needed. He directed the assistants to determine an appropriate number of suspension days for the student, then he left the room. One assistant suggested five days, the others agreed, and he sent for the student to tell him the news. After a 10-minute conference, the assistant opened his office door and asked me to talk with the student, who was very upset. He suggested I use my counseling skills. When I entered the office, the student was hunched over sobbing deeply. He looked like a vulnerable, frightened child. I explained who I was and asked if I could sit next to him. I told him I was sorry for the situation, but he had done a "dopey" thing, which kids his age sometimes do. Now he would need to take the consequences. I said that it probably felt like the end of the world now, but it would be okay again. The student replied that he had never been in trouble in his life and that his birthday was the following week. Because he was suspended, he would be unable to finish Driver's education and would not receive his license. Also, his relatives were coming from out-of-state to watch him participate in the extracurricular activity from which he was now suspended. I told him I would share that information with someone but not to get his hopes up that anything was going to change.

I asked the principal if this new information made a difference; it did. He said he would take care of Driver's Education. The student might get his license a few days late but would still receive it. I told the administrators this student was vulnerable to the full weight of their sanctions; he had no defenses, no toughness built up. I then returned to the student. He explained the sponsor had said her sanction was the only one he would receive. I once again told him I needed to leave for a few minutes. I returned to the principal and shared this new information. The administrators reduced the suspension to three days, thus making the student eligible for the activity that weekend. The assistant principal who had originally spoken with the student then left the office to share the good news.

I later asked the assistant principal if he was satisfied with the outcome. He said he was and that the student was very happy with it. A three-day suspension was a reprieve after the threat of office. I also spoke with another assistant who had jokingly suggested that I was overly protective of this student. I said, "I am not soft. I'm fair." I truly believed that I was advocating for a fair response to this student's situation. But I suspected that some of the administrators thought I might not be tough enough for this job.

Critical Incident #4

As an important component of my internship experience, I attempted to develop a program that addressed some of the school's attendance problems. Attendance Improvement Motivation (AIM) had a worthy goal and some worthwhile components, but it never fully bloomed. In November, the second month of my internship, two assistant principals approached me with the attendance project idea. This suggestion suited my counseling background, and I immediately undertook an education literature review. This search revealed little useful information, so I worked from the risk minimization literature. AIM would include a peer goal setting group, a teacher mentor for each student, and attendance incentives.

The sponsoring assistant principal identified all students who had missed 15 or more days by mid-December. I then asked the administrators to deselect any students they believed would be inappropriate. The remaining 120 students were my candidates. I presented the program's framework to the school ~ Student Responsibility Committee. These teachers provided some good insights and suggestions, which I incorporated into the program.

My first obstacle hinted at the difficulty of the task I had undertaken. I could not contact the students at school because, more often than not, they were absent. I then began calling students at home, where I had much greater success reaching them. I described the program to them and invited them to attend an introductory meeting. Some agreed. As the first meeting date approached, I apprised the building administrators of my progress. I sent a memo-, ..) teachers describing the program and inviting referrals. Finally, I arranged a meeting location and the first incentive of a pizza lunch.

Out of the pool of 120 student candidates, I was able to contact 40. Although 37 agreed to attend the first session, only 13 did. The second session had fewer students in attendance, and the third, interrupted by three weeks of achievement testing and spring break, had none. I wrote a final report on the demise of the program and reflected on the experience, trying to identify what I would do differently next time.

Infusing Meaning into the Internship

As the three participants in this clinical activity reflected on the critical incidents described above, as well as Faith's internship experience in its totality, we identified several observations that would improve the quality of future internship experiences. These observations are categorized as suggestions for the mentor, intern, and supervisor.

Suggestions for the Administrative Mentor

- **Transition the intern formally into and out of the school environment.** As an outsider to the school, the intern should be gracefully introduced into the school environment. Interns will be interacting with students, faculty, staff, and parents, who will want to know about them, their professional background, and their school responsibilities. Introductions may occur at a faculty meeting, Open House, student assembly, and through the school newsletter. The school community should also be informed when the intern completes the experience. As noted in the second critical incident, Faith had not been formally introduced to the student body when she served as substitute assistant principal for four days. This resulted in a certain amount of role confusion for both Faith and the students.

• Provide quality, challenging experiences. Mentors must be willing to delegate responsibilities (Milstein et al., 199.). Before assigning a task, the mentor must ascertain if it will be a product learning experience or if it is merely "busy work." Clerical activities do not make appropriate intern assignments. In addition, one or more long-term projects should be assigned, such as updating a crisis-management plan, assisting with construction of the master schedule, or working with the department chairs to develop budget requests for the upcoming year.

Faith's intern activities included a wide range of experiences. She attended Weekly administrator meetings, initially listening but eventually contributing to discussions on policy, discipline, building renovations, budget considerations, and school improvement activities. She shadowed administrators, observing the assistant principals engaged in activities related to scheduling, budgeting, and discipline. She observed the teacher evaluation process and then conducted evaluations of two student teachers, including pre-and post-conferences, and participated in interviews for staff positions. For a long-term project, Faith assumed responsibility for the Attendance Improvement Motivation program described in the fourth critical incident. Even though this program was not completely successful, Faith was provided with an invaluable opportunity to develop a program from its inception. By reflecting back on unsuccessful components of the AIM program, she also learned pitfalls to avoid with future projects.

The second critical incident illustrates the pitfalls of part-time internship placements, since they are limited by time constraints. Invariably, there must be tradeoffs of depth versus breadth of experience. School administrators must become proficient in a vast range of skill areas, but it is not possible to train the part-time intern in all areas. Consequently, the mentor, intern, and supervisor must collaboratively identify a limited number of internship goals, so that the intern will be sufficiently trained in these initial skills.

• Assume the role of a true mentor. The intern should be included in activities that provide an insider's perspective into the principal's life. The mentor must be a teacher, explaining the reasoning behind any actions, so the intern can follow the mentor's decision-making process. Mentors should discuss openly the rewards and sacrifices inherent in their positions, sharing how the job has affected their personal lives, both positively and negatively. Sharing personal anecdotes can illustrate common mistakes made by beginning administrators. Being accessible also permits the intern to seek the mentor's advice.

Over a two-year period, the previous high school administrative team had relocated to other positions, so Faith had a unique opportunity to observe a new group of administrators discovering how to work as a team. In addition, each of the three assistant principals had been assigned significant curricular responsibilities as well as other major assignments, such as budget development, master scheduling, and school improvement. Consequently, conversations in administrative meetings involved team decision-making, consideration of various options, and active reflection on problems facing the school. Faith was included in this circle, where she was able to observe the administrators' thought processes, gain their trust, and seek out their advice.

Suggestions for the Intern

• Be a "sponge." The intern must be open to new experiences that advance his/her professional development, even though these activities might be challenging, distasteful, or stressful. Faith's first intern activity involved observing the emotionally charged parent meeting described in the first critical incident, which provided a frank, uncensored introduction to one of the less desirable duties of administrators. Observing experienced administrators' skills with handling difficult situations can be illuminating, especially when a reflective discussion is held between the mentor and intern after the activity. The intern can later be provided opportunities to practice the learned skills through appropriate structured experiences.

• Be professional, efficient, and dependable. The intern will occasionally be called upon to represent the school at meetings or through supervisory responsibilities, such as when Faith was called upon to serve as assistant principal for four days. Even though she was not fully trained in all aspects of administration, she fulfilled her assigned responsibilities professionally and to the best of her ability. This experience made both Faith and her mentor aware of gaps in her on-the-job training, so she could learn these critical skills during the remainder of her internship.

• Be proactive and assertive. At the initial stages of the internship, the mentor will closely supervise the intern work. As the intern becomes acclimated to the school and increasingly proficient, the mentor should gradually reduce the amount of direct supervision, ultimately expecting the intern to be self-sufficient and a fully contributing member of the administrative team. For example, as noted in the third critical incident, the high school administrators recognized that Faith possessed exemplary counseling skills, and she was called upon to talk with the student who was being disciplined. She became intimately involved in this disciplinary procedure, became an advocate for the student, and was successful in having his suspension reduced. Through her participation in previous disciplinary referrals, she had gained confidence in her ability to work with students and was willing to express her views regarding disciplinary consequences, even though they might be in conflict with the views of other administrators.

• Consult with the university supervisor for support or advice. Sometimes the intern may wish to consult persons outside the building for their perspective, and the supervisor is a natural resource. Occasionally the intern may decide he/she is more interested in a different level (for example, a middle level assignment instead of high school), and a change in placement may be appropriate. It is important to communicate with the university supervisor, who can decide whether to intervene, to help the intern work through areas of misunderstanding, or to initiate a change of placement.

At one point during her experience, Faith questioned whether other schools might be addressing similar issues as those she had experienced. In addition to the female gang activity, at aberrations that year included tensions between the teachers' union and administration, two student deaths, and a threatened lawsuit. With her approval, her professor arranged for her to observe administrators of two high schools in communities with characteristics different from her placement. These visits proved to be very revealing for Faith. She learned that every school has its

own culture and unique challenges. She returned from these observations with renewed confidence in her ability to effectively lead a school and was reinvigorated as she continued her internship experiences.

Suggestions for the University Supervisor

•Maintain open communication channels, while being unobtrusive. The supervisor should clearly define all parties' responsibilities at an initial meeting before the placement is confirmed, then monitor progress, remaining accessible to the intern and mentor if needed. Reynolds (1997) discovered that less than one in five administrators need or desire close university supervision of the internship process, no doubt due to their all-consuming workloads. However, the supervisor should intervene promptly if the intern is not participating in experiences related to identified goals or if the intern is not fulfilling program expectations.

After an initial goal-setting meeting with Faith and Robert, Don's on-site visits were limited in deference to their workloads. Robert and Don maintained contact by telephone and e-mail communications. Faith and Don met at regular intervals, with Don carefully reading her journals and reflective papers, providing written responses or telephone calls, and occasionally suggesting professional readings and additional activities to enrich her experiences.

•Provide constructive feedback to the intern and the mentor principal. The intern's journal can be a highly effective means to reinforce learning experiences and pose reflective questions. If the principal is not providing adequate feedback to the intern or is not assigning high quality tasks, or if the intern is not completing his/her responsibilities at a satisfactory level of proficiency, the supervisor should tactfully intervene.

Since this internship experience represented a first mentor experience for Robert and the other three administrative team members, it was as much a learning experience for them as it was for Faith. Providing a list of potential activities assisted with the process of identifying and selecting quality tasks and was especially helpful for Robert.

Improving the Quality of Administrative Internship Programs

Because of the major time investments in the clinical experience by the intern, mentor, and supervisor, educational administration program faculties must continually examine methods to improve the quality of this activity. The following suggestions are offered to help ensure that internships will prepare individuals for success as school principals.

1. The internship must be an integral component of the principal preparation program. Milstein (1990) cautions that clinical experiences are frequently an afterthought, are typically not preplanned, and are rarely well coordinated. Successful participation in an internship experience must be required for completion of a principal preparation program and subsequent administrative licensure, since the field "is where interns learn how site administrators manage and lead" (Milstein et al., 1991, p. 45).

Since most individuals enrolled in administrator preparation programs are employed as full-time teachers, educational administration faculties should structure internship requirements in ways that strike a balance between the demands of the

university and the employer. In light of the nationwide shortage of certified individuals willing to assume principalships (Barker, 1997), school district administrative personnel may consider establishing paid intern positions or providing release time for teachers enrolled in administrator preparation programs to complete internship activities.

2. The internship must provide a longitudinal and complete perspective the principal's responsibilities. Clinical experiences must be of sufficient duration to provide a comprehensive understanding of the principal's multiple roles and responsibilities. The National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA, 1989) recommends that internships should last a minimum of one year, while Gresso (1993) recommends one-semester placements. Year-long internships permit the intern to experience activities at both the beginning and end of the academic year. Blocks of time devoted exclusively to clinical activities are necessary to help the intern develop a comprehensive understanding of administrative routines and daily tasks; learn to identify and solve problems within the context of a dynamic, changing organization; see projects through to completion; and experience the consequences of one's decisions. Senge (1990) cautions, "we learn best from experience but we never directly experience the consequences of many of our most important decisions" (p. 23). Recognizing that old problems can resurface throughout the semester or year in new forms is a skill best developed through experience.

3. Careful selection of the field site is critical, and placement at multiple field sites should be encouraged The intern must be matched with a compatible mentor and placed in a school that provides appropriate growth-evoking activities (Cordeiro & Smith-Sloan, 1995). The mentor should understand his/her vital role in serving as a role model and preparing the intern for the challenges of administration. Daresh and Playko (1992) caution that "field-based programs are valuable only if they avoid the temptation to show newcomers 'how we do it around here,' without giving an opportunity to construct better ways of 'doing it'" (p. 51). The mentor must be committed to providing- an outstanding learning environment.

The majority of clinical experiences occur in the same schools where the intern teaches (Daresh & Playko, 1992), most likely because this convenient arrangement allows the intern to maximize the time available in a normal workday. However, in order to provide broad-based experiences, students need to observe administrators working in a variety of settings, including those outside the intern's place of work. Milstein (1993) notes, "This diversity permits interns to observe different leadership styles and gain clearer understandings of aspects of leadership that are unique to different schools and those that are universally important" (p. 198). Placement options should include rural and metropolitan settings and a variety of grade levels, with field sites complementing and expanding the intern's previous work experiences. Exposure to multiple administrators working in varied settings assists interns in determining leadership styles that best match their philosophy and personality.

4. Activities must be authentic administrative experiences, increasing complexity as the internship progresses. In order to maximize the effectiveness of the clinical experience, activities should provide interns numerous opportunities to get their hands dirty, since "it is simplistic to think that merely putting people out into school settings more frequently will automatically improve the quality of educational leadership in this country" (Daresh & Playko, 1992, p. 16). Acculturating the intern into the profession

cannot merely be left to chance. Quality hands-on experiences must be identified, with the intern expected to complete these assignments.

Cordeiro and Smith-Sloan (1995) advise mentors to scaffold opportunities for the intern, increasing the complexity as the intern gains skill and experience. There is value in asking the intern to initially shadow the mentor, observing such duties as presenting at a board of education meeting or handling a crisis situation. These observations can be infused with meaning when the mentor debriefs with the intern, explaining his/her thought processes. However, as the internship progresses, the time devoted to active experiences must far exceed that devoted to passive observations (Milstein, 1990).

5. Connections must be made between knowledge learned in the classroom and practice in the field. "Learning, in the context of preparation of educational leaders, takes place most meaningfully when there is opportunity to apply concepts" (Milstein et al., 1991, p. 5). This theory-practice connection can be facilitated in several ways. First, the mentor should be asked to relate assigned tasks to the 21 domains of the knowledge and skill base for principals identified by the NPBEA (1993) or the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (1996) standards. At the commencement of the internship, the student should complete a self-assessment, identifying activities collaboratively with the mentor that will complement prior experiences and strengthen perceived weaknesses. Secondly, professors can identify activities that interns are required to complete during their courses. For example, for a Personnel Administration course assignment, the intern may be asked to interview teacher applicants alongside their mentor principal. As interns engage in reflective writing in their daily journals, they should also connect their field experiences to classroom knowledge. Additionally, professors can provide opportunities for interns to discuss their ongoing experiences, either in their university courses or during reflection seminars (Cordeiro & Smith-Sloan, 1995).

6. A realistic view of the principal's responsibilities must be provided. Milstein (1990) notes that the core purpose of the internship "is to assure the leadership required to support our schools" (p. 6). This preparation cannot happen if the intern is insulated from the harsh realities of the principalship. Potential administrators need to experience confrontational situations, such as conferencing with a hostile parent or working with a manipulative or marginally competent teacher. They need to know these interactions occur with some degree of regularity, because they are deciding whether to embark on an administrative career based on experiencing administrative life through their field placement. They also need to observe veteran administrators skillfully handling explosive situations so they can reference these approaches when confronted with similar problems.

Conclusion

The internship is a valuable experience in the preparation of future administrators. Each of the three key players must perform his/her role thoughtfully and effectively in order to serve well the affected students, teachers, school community, and the profession itself. The descriptions and suggestions in this article are intended to assist the intern, the mentor principal, and the supervising professor in creating an optimal experience and a well-prepared administrator for tomorrow's schools.

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