

Examining the Value Master's and PhD Students Place on Various Instructional Methods in Educational Leadership Preparation

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The purpose of this study was to determine the value that graduate students place on different types of instructional methods used by professors in educational leadership preparation programs, and to determine if master's and doctoral students place different values on different instructional methods. The participants included 87 graduate students, including 43 master's students and 44 PhD students in an educational leadership program at a university located in the Southwest. The students completed a qualitative survey that asked them to discuss instructional methods that they valued, including specific types of (a) class discussions, (b) in-class learning activities other than discussions, (c) course readings (d) out-of-class assignments and projects other than readings, and (e) instruction provided by a "composite" outstanding professor of educational leadership. Although both master's and doctoral students valued many of the same instructional methods, there were clear differences between the two groups regarding several methods. This study begins to address the gaps in our knowledge base on graduate students' perceptions of different instructional methods used in leadership preparation.

Introduction

Scholars of educational leadership preparation have for some time been calling for reforms in the content of preparation programs, urging a shift from a curriculum based on management theory and social science research to content in areas like instructional leadership (Brazer & Bauer, 2013), analytic skills (Goldring & Schuermann, 2009), school-community collaboration, school improvement, vision building (Ballenger, Alford, McCune, & McCune, 2009), technology skills (Dale, Moody, Slattery, & Wieland, 2007), and democratic education (Gerstl-Pepin & Aiken, 2009). The greatest appeal for content reform in recent years has been the call to focus leadership preparation on social justice (Diem & Carpenter, 2012; Furman, 2012). Change in program content, regardless of which of the calls for curriculum reform are adopted, is unlikely to lead to improved student learning if it is not accompanied by quality instruction. If students do not consider the instruction they receive to be of reasonably high quality, there is little likelihood they will develop the intended leadership capacities.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to determine what instructional methods used by professors in educational leadership preparation programs graduate students value, and if master's and doctoral students value different instructional methods. The research questions were:

1. What types of class discussions do educational leadership students value, and do master's and doctoral students value different types of class discussions?
2. What types of in-class activities other than discussions do educational leadership students value, and do master's and doctoral students value different types of in-class activities?
3. What types of readings do educational leadership students value, and do master's and doctoral students value different types of readings?
4. What types of out-of-class assignments other than readings do educational leadership students value, and do master's and doctoral students value different types of out-of-class assignments?
5. How do educational leadership students describe the outstanding instructor of educational leadership, and do master's and doctoral students describe the outstanding instructor differently?

Review of Literature

Instructional methods used by professors of educational leadership include in-class and out-of-class activities. In-class methods recommended in the literature include shared inquiry, case study, role-play (Siegrist, 2000), problem-based learning (Brazer & Bauer, 2013), exercises using web-based technology (Mayer, Musser, & Remidez, 2001), simulations (Dotger, 2011), constructivist teaching and learning, (Doolittle, Stanwood, & Simmerman, 2006), and collaborative learning (Young, O'Doherty, Gooden, & Goodnow, 2011)). Out-of-class methods suggested in the literature include various online activities, school-based experiences such as school improvement and action research projects (Ballenger, Alford, McCune, & McCune, 2009; Bartee, 2012; Goldring & Schuermann, 2009), community engagement (Bartee, 2012), cross-cultural discussions, cultural histories of diverse communities, equity audits (Furman, 2012),

portfolio development (Meadows & Dyal, 2000), and reflective writing on all of these experiences. Below we briefly review a number of instructional methods described in the literature on educational leadership preparation.

Case Method

Diamantes and Ovington (2003) review benefits of using cases as a teaching tool, including the fostering of student involvement, application of learning to real or realistic situations, critical reflection and analysis, problem solving skills, self-directed learning, and the development of a learning community. An example of case method process described by Diamantes and Ovington begins with a mini-lesson on the topic, followed by the introduction of the case to small groups of students who read the case, brainstorm solutions, and present their findings. Students can be asked to write their own cases as a learning activity. In student case-writing described by Sherman (2008), students visualized a scenario they might experience as a principal and which they would successfully resolve. In the cases they wrote, the students assumed the role of negotiator or facilitator and developed actions they would take to address the problem they had envisioned. The students integrated references to relevant literature with the situation they described.

Problem-Based Learning

Bridges (1992) presents the classic model of problem-based learning (PBL) for educational leadership, which involves small groups of aspiring administrators using developing knowledge to address problems they are likely to experience as educational leaders. Two models of PBL described by Bridges are student-centered learning and problem-stimulated learning. Student-centered learning includes a description of the problem, a specified product, and a time limit for producing the product. Problem-stimulated learning includes all of the components of the student-centered model but also provides the students with learning objectives, resources, guiding questions, and assessment exercises. Brazer and Bauer (2013) argue that PBL allows students to practice leadership skills in a safe environment, with the professor close-at-hand to provide feedback and support, and to work with their peers to apply theories they are learning to situations and problems that mirror reality.

Simulations

Dotger (2011) describes simulated interactions between school leaders and students, parents, and faculty based on interviews with school administrators about actual interactions, including both positive and negative exchanges. According to Dotger, simulations offer those assuming the role of school leader the opportunity to participate with peers in reality-like experiences that are both professionally and emotionally challenging, after which immediate analysis can take place and feedback can be provided. The model discussed by Dotger involves a cycle of simulation, reflection, and creation of an improvement plan. The simulations include unscripted protocols for the participant in the role of school leader and standardized protocols for participants in the role of student, teacher, or parent. An individual debriefing immediately following the simulation allows the participant in the school leadership role to reflect on the problem presented in the simulation, her or his performance, areas for improvement, and next steps that would be

necessary to fully address the problem. Following the simulation, each participant views and reflects on a video of the simulation and chooses a one-minute segment of the video to share at a large group briefing a week after the simulation. All members of the large group session show the group their video segments, then engage in discussion with their colleagues about the video. Dotger suggests that such simulations can bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Praxis

Praxis historically has been focused on reflective action for social justice. Although the extent to which social justice is addressed in an educational leadership program is initially a curricular issue, once social justice content is introduced it becomes an instructional matter as well, because a variety of instructional methods are directly related to the development of social justice leaders. Furman (2012) has proposed five dimensions of “social justice leadership as praxis” (p. 204) and recommends activities, some focused on reflection and others on action, for developing social justice leaders. A few examples of Furman’s suggested activities for each dimension are listed below:

- *Personal dimension:* cultural autobiographies, self-reflection on one’s developmental stages, forms of guided self-reflection such as journaling, and leadership growth plans based on self-assessment
- *Interpersonal dimension:* life histories, cross-cultural interviews, diversity panels, role-plays
- *Communal dimension:* community exploration, school environment analysis, democratic forums, team building, equity audits, community action plans
- *Systemic dimension:* visits to social justice schools, educational plunges, diversity panels, simulations, audit-based activist plans, role plays of equity interviews
- *Ecological dimension:* Readings and reflective discussions on relationships between schools and broader social issues, studies of local communities, the design of professional development that connects schools and communities, and action research by K-12 students (pp. 205-212)

Furman points out that much of the current literature on educational leadership for social justice is focused on critical consciousness, which while necessary, needs to be accompanied by skill development based on activities like the ones she describes.

Practice-Based Research

The literature on educational leadership development presents several different models of practice-based research that can be incorporated into preparation programs. These models can be placed on a continuum from low to high intervention. At the low-intervention end of the continuum, in one example described by Sappington, Baker, Gardner, and Pacha (2010), aspiring principals compared school improvement plans to the actual planning process and improvement activities in schools. In another example reviewed by Sappington, et al., aspiring principals interviewed a central office administrator, principal, and two teachers on a school’s professional development program over the previous two years and then wrote a paper comparing the professional development program with literature on effective professional development.

Further along the intervention continuum is the type of student research described by Ärlestig (2012) in which participants spend a year studying about a school problem identified by the school's principal. The participant becomes familiar with literature on the problem and the school, designs a study, gathers and analyzes data on the problem, and prepares a report including recommendations for addressing the problem. After the report is shared, the principal may or may not decide to act on the researcher's recommendations.

Still further along the continuum lies the model proposed by Kowalski, Place, Edmister, and Zigler (2009) in which aspiring principals identify a school problem, apply a relevant theory to the problem, and modify the theory to make it more applicable to the local context. This applied research gives aspiring principals considerable decision-making power in terms of designing and conducting the research, but at the same time limits them to testing and refining existing theory.

At the high-intervention end of the continuum is the type of full-scale action research described by Jacobs, Yammamura, Guerra, and Nelson (2013), in which aspiring principals and teachers at a school conduct a needs assessment, write a review of literature on a priority need, develop an action plan, and then implement the action research, gathering and analyzing evaluation data at the end of the project.

Arts-Based Methods

Two methods described by Katz-Buonincontro and Phillips (2011)—reflection on arts-based activities and improvisational role-playing—represent an arts-based approach to the preparation of educational leaders. In a study of the first method, educational leadership doctoral students visited visual and performing arts venues, read creative literature, and engaged in their own art projects. Students reported that they were more reflective, willing to take risks, and creative as a result of completing the course. The second study was on a course for doctoral students centered on improvisational theatrical role-plays involving the students and actors. The actors helped the students journey through five phases: choosing the problem, projecting the problem, amplifying the problem, identifying potential solutions, objectifying the problem, and selecting a solution. The students reported that the course helped them to become more reflective, adopt new perspectives, contemplate problems, and consider creative solutions.

Portfolio Development

Student portfolios can be used not only for student assessment but also as a vehicle for student learning. Portfolios can foster self-assessment (Hackmann & Alsbury, 2005), promote self-reflection, link theory and practice (Knoeppel & Logan, 2011), assist individualized learning (Meadows & Dyal, 2000), structure long-term professional development, and encourage collaborative learning (Gottesman & Villa, 2001). The contents of portfolios are described in numerous ways. At the most general level, portfolios consist of artifacts, attestations, and reflections (Hackman & Alsbury, 2005). Portfolios constructed by students in educational leadership programs are often organized around designated concepts. For example, the concepts in portfolios described by Gutterman and Villa (2001) include administration and management, democratic education, equity, change leadership, and reflective inquiry on practice.

Technology-Enhanced Teaching and Learning

Technology can be used to deliver instruction to students at a distance, enhance face-to-face instruction, and even simulate field experiences in K-12 schools and classrooms. LaFrance and Beck (2014) define web-facilitated courses as those with 1 to 29 percent of content delivered online, blended or hybrid courses as providing 30 to 79 percent of content online, and online courses as those with 80 percent or more of content delivered online. Sherman and Beaty (2007) argue that online education can provide not only a longer geographic reach but also improved teaching and learning in leadership preparation. According to LeFrance and Beck (2014), only 9 percent of educational leadership preparation programs provide virtual field experiences, and 95 percent of the programs that provide virtual experiences blend those experiences with face-to-face field activities.

Research Methods

The participants included 87 graduate students, including 43 master's students and 44 PhD students in an educational leadership program at a university located in the Southwest. The surveys were completed during class meetings, with students not wishing to complete the surveys free to leave class early. The qualitative survey asked the respondents to discuss valued instructional methods, including specific types of (a) class discussions, (b) in-class learning activities other than discussions, (c) course readings (d) out-of-class assignments and projects other than readings, and (e) instruction provided by a "composite" outstanding professor of educational leadership. Although we asked the students for their perceptions of valued instructional methods, they sometimes voiced negative perceptions of particular methods, and we also report negative themes that emerged from the data.

Data analysis began with several reviews of survey responses to become intimately familiar with the data. We completed open, line-by-line coding of the students' responses, and then proceeded with axial coding to develop categories. With the aid of a series of matrices on which we displayed data relative to each survey topic, and ongoing analytic memos, we identified themes that cut across both groups as well as themes unique to one group or the other.

Results

We present our results under headings corresponding to the topics we asked the graduate students to discuss. The quotes we share are representative of themes present within the perceptions of one or both groups.

Class Discussions

Master's and doctoral students expressed very positive perceptions of both small- and whole-group discussions. Both groups appreciated discussions that encouraged students to share their personal experiences. Students were especially appreciative of discussions that helped individuals to transform their thinking. One master's student described a discussion of this type:

We were discussing the issue of another student being a “border crosser” because she married someone from Mexico. During one of the classes, she had been offended when this term was used. As we had this discussion, her perception of the term changed, as did her view of the people, culture, and customs on the other side of the border. Once she did that, she was able to embrace her circumstances in a whole new, positive way. It was nice to be witness to that transformation.

Master’s and doctoral students valued discussions in which every student had a voice. One benefit of allowing everyone to express himself or herself cited by the students is that it allows different points of view to be considered and often integrated. In the words of a master’s student:

I have really enjoyed class discussions where peers are able to contribute and various contributions are given so that many points of view are exposed. This is great when it is concluded by the professor facilitating a dialogue that brings the ideas and key points from the class together.

Both master’s and doctoral students believed they benefited greatly from discussion of research on the topic being addressed, including discussion of case studies. Both groups of students valued discussions on how the topic at hand could be applied to practice. For example, a master’s student stated, “A good class discussion included conversation about peer-reviewed studies, leading into how it related or didn’t relate to individuals in the class, and the potential application of all of the information exchanged.” A doctoral student recalled the following:

Team building was a particularly good class discussion because we were able to help some cohort members, through discussion, in suggesting [how] they could adopt the readings to their real-life work setting. This was very intriguing and interesting to watch; how these ideas and theories could be effectively applied to different situations.

There were only two types of discussions in which master’s and doctoral students’ perceptions differed in any notable way: discussions of theory and discussions focused on social justice. Although both groups made generally positive comments about the discussion of theory, the doctoral students provided more specific examples of valued theoretical discussions. Similarly, although both groups expressed general appreciation of discussions on equity and social justice, the doctoral students more frequently described specific discussions that they valued. One doctoral student, for instance, commented, “We discussed Critical Race Theory. We were able to construct and deconstruct methodologies and openly discuss multiple ways of knowing while questioning how education and power structures promote racism in the U.S.” Themes for the class discussion responses are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of Themes: Types of Valued Class Discussions

Both Groups	Master's Students Only	PhD Students Only
Small and whole-group	Discussion of social justice mentioned	Discussion of social justice described in detail
Share personal experiences	Discussion of theory mentioned	Discussion of theory described in detail
Transformative		
Every Student has voice		
Discussion of research on topic		

In-Class Activities Other than Discussions

Master's and doctoral students were enamored of small-group problem solving activities, including those conducted in a single class meeting as well as longer-term, problem-based learning. Regarding the former, a doctoral student said, "problem solving activities in small groups helped give voice to all participants and brought the lesson to practical use." Both master's and doctoral students said they valued brainstorming possible solutions as one phase of the problem-solving activity. Regarding problem-based learning, a master's student reported, "I found group research of a structural problem in an organization was fascinating and allowed us to develop a rapport within our cohort. [The professor] gave enough freedom in the project to allow true problem-based learning."

Both groups believed they had learned a great deal from simulations in which they participated. An example of a valued simulation at the master's level involved students prioritizing and responding to messages received from stakeholders. A description of a simulation at the doctoral level reviewed how students were asked to "handicap" themselves for the duration of a class in order to become more sensitive to the realities that persons with disabilities deal with every day.

A final class activity that both groups valued highly was the use of case method. A master's student commented,

I remember one time that in a small group my peers and I got a case study and then had to discuss the scenario for the problem presented. I feel like this was a very practical way of doing that activity. We were "hiring" a candidate from a group of applicants. It helped us have important conversations about personnel issues, which was the particular topic that day.

Although role-playing was not a major theme for either group, a subgroup of doctoral students did discuss role-plays in which students played real-life people or educators in real-world situations. A doctoral student recalled,

Role-playing a real decision-making process was another approach that I learned in my school improvement courses. One professor informed us to role-play various positions that helped us to feel and hear the way decisions related to school improvement were made.

Master’s and doctoral students seldom discussed viewing videos, panel discussions, visiting presenters, artistic activities, and student debate in positive terms. Notably, neither group discussed the lecture as a preferred instructional method. One disagreement between master’s and doctoral students concerned various inventories, such as adult learning style and adult lifestyle inventories. Master’s students placed more value than doctoral students on completing and analyzing the results of such inventories. Table 2 summarizes themes for class activities other than discussions.

Table 2

Summary of Themes: Types of Valued Class Activities Other than Discussions

Both Groups	Master’s Students Only	PhD Students Only
Single-class small-group problem solving	Adult learning style and lifestyle inventories	Subgroup theme: Role-playing real-life people and situations
Long-range problem-based learning		
Simulations		
Case Method		

Readings

Both master’s and doctoral students voiced a preference for reading case studies. Neither group placed a great deal of value on reading textbooks. A master’s student lamented, “For me, it is hard to read chapter after chapter just to find a few practical pieces of information.” Although there was little preference voiced for non-scholarly works by either group, a subgroup of master’s students reported that they had benefited greatly from reading fiction in the course “Understanding Self.” One master’s student wrote, “Novels allow you to unlock your imagination and connect to personal experiences, which in turn ties back to that reflective analysis, which is so powerful.” Another master’s student remarked, “Novels are my bread and butter; something that is related to the subject but takes the readers on a path”. A third master’s student stated, “I gain the most perspective from fiction literature. For my style of learning, I believe it best facilitates genuine thinking and analysis.” A theme running through the

perceptions of doctoral students that was not present in the master's students' responses was a valuing of journal articles, from both scholarly and practitioner journals. Students from both groups preferred readings that included implications for practice. Themes for types of preferred readings are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

Summary of Themes: Types of Valued Readings

Both Groups	Master's Students Only	PhD Students Only
Case Studies	Subgroup theme: Fiction related to class topic	Articles from scholarly journals
Readings with implications for practice		Articles from practitioner journals

Other Out-of-Class Assignments Other than Readings

Assignments involving reflective writing were highly valued by both master's and doctoral students. A master's student stated,

Writing reflections is probably one of the most enriching assignments I've had the pleasure of doing. Reflecting on the self and different assignments sheds light on your overall understanding. It is hard to imagine what grad school would be like without reflecting on your journey.

A doctoral student wrote,

Writing a reaction paper to the lesson that we were taught on a particular day was really great. The reaction paper was spread not only to the reactions to the teaching-learning process, but it allowed me to share ideas about how I viewed the points raised by the professor and the other articles that we had been asked to read.

A more complex form of reflective writing assigned to both master's and doctoral students was the autoethnography. A master's student wrote, "It pushes the boundary of being comfortable. I believe it allowed me to see more in myself, which will make me a better leader." A doctoral student described the benefits of autoethnography:

The process, production, and presentation were transformational. I gained such insight into my own history, values, struggles, and relationships...and this activity took place at the beginning of my doctoral experience. By the end of my coursework, I had discovered why the autoethnography was so important to my work as a researcher and scholar—how my past informs my thinking and interpretations of data...even the theoretical frameworks I choose to operate from are informed by the ethnographic insight I gained through that activity.

Both groups found value in field-based activities, either as part of a practicum or as assignments built into regular courses. Such activities included observations, gathering and analyzing data, full-scale action research, equity audits, and carrying out a variety of leadership activities. Shadowing educational leaders was an example provided under the observation category. A master's student discussed shadowing a principal:

I was asked to shadow a principal at my school for a day. This experience really opened my eyes as to what the job of being an administrator is like. I never realized how many meetings take place, or how much of the time is loosely unstructured yet still with requirements of what must get done. We probably walked three or four miles over the course of the day and the principal I was following easily interacted with 100 different people in addition to the students.

A doctoral student who had completed a qualitative research course described a valued field-based activity centered on gathering and analyzing data: "Participating in a focus group, and then transcribing and analyzing the data from the focus group was a great experience and left me really wanting to become a qualitative researcher." Another doctoral student described action research that "had us going out there and getting our hands dirty, and trying to create a report for the entire class." A master's student reported that carrying out an equity audit "made me look in more detail at the community where my students live."

Leadership activities that master's and doctoral students engaged in included professional development, instructional supervision, community engagement, and so forth. A master's student wrote that being involved in school leadership activities allowed the student "to view our campus from a different perspective and take on a different role...this assignment gave me the opportunity to execute some of my ideas." Another assignment valued by both groups was conducting interviews, with teachers, educational leaders, scholars, and even family members. A master's student noted,

Conducting interviews is always informative. Interviews truly extend the learning. Even when you are unaware of the outcome, you know what you are looking for if it (the interview) is given as an assignment. Reflecting on the knowledge and wisdom of others can be very beneficial.

Preparing demonstrations to be shown to the class and lessons to be taught to the class were other out-of-class activities that both master's and doctoral students perceived as valuable learning experiences. A master's student wrote, "Having to prepare presentations for class with activities [for the students to complete], makes you focus on the material since you have to teach and facilitate it." A doctoral student discussed "Teaching colleagues about a topic, above and beyond the readings with real-world examples and activities."

There were a number of traditional out-of-class assignments that were seldom discussed as valuable by either group. Despite the power often attributed to journaling, it was seldom mentioned by master's or doctoral students. When journaling was discussed in a positive light, it was by students who had kept journals on their own across their years of graduate study, not as part of assigned coursework. One student noted,

Keeping a journal during my time in the PhD program helped me process and connect what was happening in the public institution where I worked and assisted me in making sense of the research articles I was reading. I could actually begin to have a better understanding of praxis, where theory and practice come together.

In general, neither master's nor doctoral students valued the creation of videos or recordings, unless they were the medium for a larger activity that the students found worthwhile. For instance, some professors required students to present the aforementioned and highly valued autoethnographies as videos, and students reported those videos became cherished artifacts. Few students from either group reported valuing long-term group projects conducted outside of class, but there were a few notable exceptions. The first quote below about long-term group projects came from master's students, the second from a doctoral student:

We had to develop a professional development plan for a real campus based on actual data. I liked this activity because it mirrored an actual task that we will have to do as educational leaders.

We were assigned a theoretical framework and told to do something in the community representing that framework. Our group was given feminism and organized a girls' job fair at a local school that represented male dominated career choices but featured women who had chosen that career. It was great using the material and putting it into relative practice.

There were very few students in either group who reported that they valued using creative or artistic expression in class assignments, creating posters or displays to share with the class, developing portfolios, writing policy briefs, or writing reviews of case law. Regarding the latter, a master's student wrote,

Analyzing [legal briefs] in a class lecture seems to be all that is necessary. Having to write a 20-page paper is pointless. We're just restating what we learned from the case briefs and the paper is a long, busy-work assignment.

There were several themes running through doctoral students' perceptions of valuable assignments that were not present across master's student's perceptions. Doctoral students more often discussed carrying out case studies, writing research papers, and other long-term individualized projects as valuable learning experiences. Table 4 summarizes themes for out-of-class assignments other than readings.

Composite Description of Outstanding Instructor

There were no major differences between the master's and doctoral students' perceptions of an outstanding instructor of educational leadership. We drew three general characteristics of outstanding instructors from the composite descriptions written by the graduate students. Outstanding instructors, according to the students, model educational leadership, create an organic learning environment, and take a constructivist approach to teaching.

Table 4

Summary of Themes: Out-of-Class Assignments Other than Readings

Both Groups	Master’s Students Only	PhD Students Only
Reflective writing		Case studies
Autoethnography		Research papers in general
Field Activities		Long-term individualized projects
Preparing demonstrations for class		
Preparing lessons to be taught to graduate class		

Modeling educational leadership. The master’s and doctoral students perceived the outstanding instructor as modeling the personal characteristics and actions of successful educational leaders. The outstanding instructor, according to the students, is approachable, personable, displays a good sense of humor, has an engaging personality, is well organized, and cares for students. The master’s and doctoral students perceived the outstanding instructor as knowledgeable about the current literature on educational leadership and familiar with best practice. Master’s and doctoral students perceived the outstanding instructor as being open and respectful to students, treating them as equals. According to the students, the outstanding instructor both challenges students to reach their potential and provides them with detailed, constructive feedback. As one doctoral student put it, “The instructor didn’t give me an A just for breathing; she handed my work back, told me what was lacking, and had me do it again.”

Creating an organic learning environment. The term “organic learning environment” came from one of the graduate students and it reflects a concept expressed by both master’s and doctoral students. The organic environment the students described includes elements of care, openness, psychological safety, trust, flexibility, empowerment, critical reflection, and creativity. It is perhaps best described in a series of quotes from master’s and doctoral students:

- The environment is inviting, the learning is meaningful, thus true reflection is inevitable.
- Open dialogue with students, judge-free zone, informative, sincere, open to new ideas....
- The stage is set at the beginning that limits will be stretched and the environment needs to be a safe one to do so. The fact that learning is actually taking place lends to the structure of the class. The avenue that we use to get there changes from class to class, as we do. The process evolves.
- The class is structured to allow for plenty of critical discussion and the students have a level of trust with one another and with the professor so those crucial conversations can take place in a safe environment.

The students reported that when the instructor created an organic learning environment it opened up space for growth and led to collaborative learning among students.

Taking a constructivist approach to teaching. For both groups, the outstanding instructor engaged in constructivist teaching. A doctoral student describing an outstanding professor related, “We could problem-pose and ask compelling questions of each other: student to student, student to teacher, and teacher to student.” One aspect of the constructivist approach highlighted by both master’s and doctoral students was the encouragement of self-reflection and self-discovery. A master’s student wrote that the outstanding instructor “encourages students to get out of their comfort zone. This often results in meaningful self-reflection and re-discovery.” A doctoral student stated, “The composite instructor plays devil’s advocate with the students—pushing them to justify their ‘status quo’ thinking.” Another doctoral student said, “Professors that ask questions that may not have an answer and leave us perplexed and losing sleep for a few days are the best.” Both groups discussed the changing of old perspectives and construction of new knowledge as a result of self-reflection. A doctoral student discussed the effects of teachers who promote reflection: “By the end of their classes you are shocked to realize that there has been a shift in your perspective on certain issues that you thought were already resolved in your mind.” The students also saw the self-reflection promoted by the outstanding instructor as a way for students to personalize learning and construct their own meaning.

Students in both groups described their outstanding instructor as fostering social as well as individual construction of knowledge. A doctoral student noted that the outstanding instructor encouraged social construction of knowledge when they “engaged in dialogue, rather than lecture.” A master’s student wrote, “This professor encourages students to regularly engage in deep, meaningful conversations. Through this process, I learned so much from others, about others, and about myself.” Themes for a composite description of an outstanding instructor are summarized in Table 5.

Discussion

This exploratory study involved master’s and doctoral students from a single university, thus the points we make in this discussion are tentative. Based on our experience as professors of educational leadership who teach in master’s and PhD programs that have almost completely discreet student populations, we were surprised that we did not find more difference in the types of instructional methods master’s and doctoral students value. We believe, however, that this study provides a great deal of tentative information on instructional methods that graduate students at both levels do and do not value. Our headings below parallel the research questions and headings in the results section.

Class Discussions

The master’s and doctoral students clearly preferred open discussion to direct instruction, especially when that discussion gave all students a voice, allowed them to relate the topic to their personal beliefs and experiences, and generated ideas for applying the topic to practice. An additional idea found in the survey responses that bears further consideration is that of taking time toward the end of a discussion to integrate differing views into a coherent whole.

Table 5

Summary of Themes: Composite Description of an Outstanding Instructor

Both Groups	Master’s Students Only	PhD Students Only
Modeling educational leadership		
Creating an organic learning environment		
Taking a constructivist approach to teaching		

Class Activities

One overarching conclusion regarding the class activities valued by master’s and doctoral students is that active learning was vastly preferred to passive learning. The students’ perceptions of problem-based learning mirror the benefits of the model described by Brazer and Bauer (2013)—it allows students to collaboratively test their theories of action in a safe environment. Simulations, also highly valued by the students, took them even closer to a real-world environment while providing the same protection. The use of case method, as described by the master’s and doctoral students, followed the same process and yielded the same benefits discussed by Dotger (2011). The students’ preference for telling their personal and professional stories, especially their phases of development, indicates that leadership preparation programs need to seriously consider learning focused on adult and career development.

The low value that most master’s and doctoral students placed on role playing may relate to the perception that it is an artificial activity, unrelated to the real world of educational leadership. The students who did value role-plays seemed to participate in enactments of situations that either had or could actually occur in districts and schools, so structuring role plays to better reflect reality may make them more valued instructional methods. Also, it seems that making role-playing one component of a wider learning activity, such as a simulation, increases its value as an instructional tool. Other instructional methods that were valued by few students—viewing videos, panel discussions, visiting presenters—when done in traditional format, turn students into passive learners. However, each one of these instructional methods can be converted into interactive activities, which we believe makes them more worthwhile to educational leadership students.

The fact that arts-based activities like those described by Katz-Buonincontro and Phillips (2011) were not valued by either group of students could well be due to the infrequent use of such activities, at least at the level of sophistication described by Katz-Buonincontro and Phillips. Why master’s students valued completing and analyzing adult learning style and adult lifestyle inventories more than doctoral students is not clear. One possible reason is that the latter group may have already completed their fair share of such inventories by the time they become doctoral students.

Readings

Our study's results indicate that case studies that integrate theory and practice are a powerful tool for educating both master's and doctoral students in educational leadership. Professors of educational leadership need to ask themselves why both types of students seem to value texts so little—is it the type of student, the quality of the texts, or how we use texts in our teaching? The high value placed on fiction, and especially on novels, by a subgroup of master's students points to the potential of fiction as an avenue for learning about leadership. Finally, given the wide variety of quality journals with both theoretical and research articles focused on educational leadership, the finding that master's students assigned little value to reading journal articles should raise questions about how we introduce and use such articles with master's students.

Other Out-of-Class Assignments

Master's and doctoral students perceived reflective writing as a key ingredient in their learning. It seems that the best combination of components in reflective writing assignments included reflections on the topic at hand in relationship to past and current experiences and the student's anticipated future leadership role. Autoethnography seems to have been an especially powerful learning tool because it promoted self-understanding within the context of the student's personal history and social environment.

Our findings regarding the power of field experiences for both groups are consistent with widespread recommendations within the field to increase the number and quality of such experiences. Both the master's and doctoral program placed a high value on field experiences embedded in regular coursework. It is such embedded field experiences, which allow for weekly face-to-face interaction with the course professor and with fellow students engaged in the same or similar field activities, that may be the best avenue to the praxis championed by scholars like Furman (2012). The practice-based research that both master's and doctoral students carried out ran the full gamut of models described in the literature. These projects allowed many master's students their first opportunity to engage in practice-based research, gave doctoral students already in leadership roles the opportunity to carry out research within their span of responsibility, and provided both groups the chance to improve their educational settings while learning how to conduct various types of research.

Given both groups' highly positive perceptions of reflective writing, we were surprised there was not more value expressed for assigned journaling. The fact that the students who discussed the value of journaling were writing about private journaling rather than assigned journaling has implications for leadership preparation. The best approach may be to invite students to journal informally and then provide space and time for students who wish to share selected portions of journals with the class or a small group to do so, either in person or online.

Neither master's nor doctoral students viewed long-term out-of-class group projects in a positive light. This may be due to logistical or communication problems students have experienced with such projects in the past, problems with appropriate distribution of responsibility among group members, and so on. In the examples of out-of-class group projects perceived positively by students, a major part of the project was school or community based. Implications for instructors of educational leadership include being selective in their use of such projects; connecting the project to practice; carefully structuring the projects in terms of process,

responsibilities, and expected outcomes; and considering providing class time for some of the group work.

The lack of positive statements about portfolio development, despite the popularity of portfolios in many leadership preparation programs, indicate a need to design portfolios that:

- connect portfolio development to individual courses as well as long-term projects that cut across several courses
- are vehicles for integrating theory, practice, and reflection
- include student collaboration as part of the portfolio development process
- will be of value to the student in his or her future career

Writing case studies, preparing research papers, and completing long-term individual projects are complex undertakings, and the finding that doctoral students expressed more value for these assignments than master's students may be because the doctoral students were more academically advanced than students at the master's level.

Outstanding Instructor

We found it interesting that both groups, in descriptions of personal and professional characteristics of their outstanding instructor, focused not on successful scholarship or dynamic teaching style but on the modeling of educational leadership. The characteristics cited by the students—caring, respectful, challenging, and supportive—seem to apply equally well to practitioners as well as professors of educational leadership. Perhaps the most interesting result of the study was the master's and doctoral students' description of an organic learning environment, consisting of several interacting elements that lead to individual and collective learning. The constructivist approach identified by both groups included both individual (self-reflection, self-discovery) and social (dialogue, group problem solving) dimensions.

Recommendations for Practice

As with the discussion above, the recommendations we make based on this exploratory study are tentative. In the case of instructional methods used in educational leadership preparation programs, the "practitioners" are university faculty, thus we address these recommendations to faculty members. First, we recommend that faculty in educational leadership preparation programs consider our findings that some instructional methods were valued by both master's and doctoral students, some were valued by neither group, and some were valued by one group and not the other. We do not suggest that instructors use our tentative findings to adopt some instructional methods and eliminate others, but rather that they begin to test the findings with their students, and make their own determinations concerning which of our findings ring true within their own context.

Many instructors, especially new faculty members, may not be familiar with some of the more innovative instructional methods for the preparation of educational leaders recommended in the literature, such as complex simulations, some types of technology assisted learning, and so forth. Professional development may be necessary, but such development need not take the form of traditional training. Rather, faculty members who want to learn more about a particular

method may wish to visit the classrooms of those who use the method to observe it being implemented, and instructors who have developed expertise in particular methods can consult others who wish to try out those methods.

Assigning some of the types of assignments valued by the students in this study (if those assignments are not already in place) seems like a good way to test the study's findings in this area. Reflective writing on course topics and their relationship to practice, autoethnographies, preparing for class demonstrations and peer teaching, and interviewing stakeholders in K-12 education are all promising out-of-class assignments for both master's and doctoral students. We also recommend that educational leadership faculties and individual instructors explore new ideas for embedding field experiences into traditional courses. The best instruction integrates research, theory, and practice, and at the individual course level that integration cannot be complete without application at the school, district, or community level. Practica and internships are powerful culminating experiences, but we cannot wait until the end of the student's program of study for application to begin. New ways of embedding school-based action research throughout students' coursework, for example, are described by Wetzel and Ewbank (2013) as well as Zambo & Isa (2012). Shadowing school leaders, performing equity audits, and carrying out leadership activities (especially instructional leadership) are just a few more examples of school-based activities that can be embedded into regular coursework.

A final recommendation for faculty is to regularly gather feedback from students beyond traditional course evaluations. Such feedback can be gathered at both the program and course level. Formative feedback should be gathered by the program and the individual faculty member on all aspects of how to improve instruction, but feedback relative to the characteristics of the "outstanding instructor" reported by the students in this study—modeling educational leadership, creating an organic learning environment, and taking a constructivist approach to teaching—seems to us to be especially vital. Are these elements evident in the individual faculty member's teaching? Are they present across the program as a whole? Based on student feedback, the individual instructor can reflect on how to strengthen the three characteristics in her or his own teaching, and the program faculty can engage in collaborative work for program renewal.

There are, of course, multiple types of data beyond student feedback that can inform faculty whether instructional methods are successful. Observations of students during classroom and field activities, analysis of student performance, and surveys or interviews of other stakeholders can all become part of the mix of methods for assessing instructional methods (Korach, 2011). In the final analysis, student preferences, the individual faculty member's teaching style, program goals, local school district needs, and "situational and organizational contexts" (Mast, Scribner, & Sanzo, 2011, p. 39) all need to be considered in decisions about what instructional methods to use in the preparation of educational leaders.

Recommendations for Future Research

We recommend that additional qualitative surveys similar to this one be done with other groups of master's and doctoral students at other universities to determine if those studies yield the same or similar results. Although we believe this study is an important early step in determining which instructional methods master's and doctoral students value, the question of the extent to which student values are contextual is still an open one. For example, different instructional methods may be valued differently depending on the types of students recruited and accepted, the program's curriculum, or the structures and systems for program delivery. Other qualitative

studies could include individual or focus group interviews on instructional methods valued by graduate students. Additionally, results of quantitative surveys on valued instructional methods could be integrated with qualitative findings to expand the emerging knowledge base on this topic.

Closing Thoughts

It is difficult to imagine any aspect of an educational leadership preparation program that is more critical to the growth and development of the students enrolled in that program than the instruction they are provided. Yet, while we have a fair amount of literature describing and promoting a few instructional methods, we have little research comparing a wide range of other instructional methods and student perceptions of those methods. Nor do we have adequate research comparing master's and doctoral students' perceptions of different methods. Hopefully this study will begin to address these gaps in our knowledge base, and will lead to additional research in this area.

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