Making Time to Reflect Together on Preparation and Practice:
Lessons Learned from Creating and Sustaining the Educational Leadership Professional Learning Alliance

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In this critical reflective manuscript, the authors share how a University-Based Educational Leadership Program created a professional learning alliance that seeks to create a network across educational leadership preparation and practice. A five-year old initiative, the Educational Leadership Professional Learning Alliance provides a platform for members to interact with each other about evolving leadership preparation needs, as well as provides a platform to organically respond to timely issues that are salient to leadership practice in a variety of roles in k-12 public schools. The alliance meetings have become space for members to find information and support, share challenges, celebrate successes, and enhance a network to promote public education. The authors describe how the initiative developed and sustained itself through mutually beneficial and timely topical discussions that reflect members' commitment to be responsive to a wide variety of personal and professional issues and concerns.

In this article we share insights into how a University-Based Educational Leadership Program created an alliance across the too often unconnected bridge of educational leadership preparation and practice. In particular, we describe the creation and evolution of an alliance of University Faculty and K-12 leaders joining together in an Educational Leadership Professional Learning Alliance (ELPLA). During the last five years, a cross section of 35 university professors, school district leaders, principals, assistant principals, teacher leaders, alumni, and current students have met quarterly to both discuss topics of importance and to provide support for each other. Members attend the three-hour meetings on Saturdays in search of a supportive environment in which to engage in meaningful collaboration and transparent dialogue around problems of preparation and practice. During this time, the alliance members have sought to engender an environment for individuals from multiple school districts in a wide variety of roles to dialogue about timely and pertinent topics. In so doing, members have sought to develop an influential network of relationships across k-12 and higher education institutions that support better-informed and sustainable leadership preparation and practice.

We begin with a review of literature and methods before turning to a description of the context for the development of the ELPLA as an externally leveraged Professional Learning Community. We then describe its organic evolution into a Professional Learning Alliance that provides sustenance to its members through a series of meaningful processes in which members learn something new. These processes include analyzing preparation and its influence on practice, creating dialogue around topics that are responsive to emerging issues in leadership practice, and creating a community of trust and support. We conclude with a discussion of how members found mutual benefit that continues to sustain the ELPLA. In offering a critical reflection on the development, benefits, and challenges of the ELPLA, we hope that our insights will be beneficial to other individuals interested in developing similar alliances.

Review of Literature

Calls for collaboration and bridge-building between university-based educational leadership programs and district and school based leaders have long-standing historical roots (Murphy, 2002; Pounder, 2011). There are also more contemporary critiques that argue for more sustained engagement in order to meet professional development needs that need to be differentiated as leaders take on new roles and experiences (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003: Hackman, Bauer, Cambron-McCabe, & Quin, 2013). While many contemporary calls for universities to build relationships with practicing administrators come from policy groups (Roach, Smith, & Boutin, 2011) and foundations (Levine, 2005; Wallace Foundation, 2013), university-based commentary and scholarship has similarly evoked the need for alliances (Black & Murtadha, 2007; Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe & Meyerson, 2005; Orr, 2011). Furthermore, Murphy (2007) has suggested that if efforts at crossing the metaphorical university-practice bridges are initiated, it is likely to support a light flow of traffic, as too often it is constructed as a one-way traffic flow-"from theory to practice" (p. 583). Nevertheless, there is a growing consensus that integration, alignment and networking between universities and school district leaders is desirable (Hackman, et al., 2013; Yendol-Hoppey, Shanley, Delane, & Hoppey, 2017) While there are multiple barriers and challenges to school-university partnerships and alliances, we will highlight two primary challenges that relate to our efforts to establish the Educational Leadership Professional Learning Alliance: knowledge commitments, and institutional roles and incentive structures. We also consider possibilities and opportunities across the same dimensions.

The Challenge of Knowledge Commitments

The type of applied knowledge that many practitioners define as preeminent is captured through and in their practice. On the other hand, university professors, often because of their training, privilege theory and materials that come from academia (Murphy, 2007). The work of academics tends to reward slow, careful, systematic approaches that build on previous scholarship and responsibly point out limitations and grey areas, while the work of policy makers and practitioners often privileges knowledge that provides more immediate solutions that clearly lay out the best options for action in the short term. The work that school leaders are asked to do "tends to bias [them] toward solution-oriented learning that fits into their hectic schedule" and addresses the needs of immediate problems or issues (Kochan, Bredeson, & Riehl, 2002, p. 290). As a result, "nuggets of knowledge that can be immediately applied are preferred over solutions requiring reflection and long-term study" (Kochan, et al., 2002, p. 290).

Given the challenge of balancing immediate learning and application that takes place in response to specific problems or issues with the long-term development of school leadership and practice, principals and university faculty are often searching for the best way to balance short and long-term focused preparation and professional development with research-based knowledge. Rather than providing a definitive answer that helps inform pressing decisions in policy and practice arenas, Henig (2009) notes that good research is often slow research as researchers tend to think of their work as limited and part and parcel of a graduated accumulation of evidence. Additionally, researchers are careful to assign causal evidence, while decisions in practice implicitly assume causation. Decisions made in real time benefit from simplification and clarity, rather than the complexity and ambiguity often sought in practice (Henig, 2009). Nevertheless, scholars such as Pounder (2011) have argued that research of leadership preparation programs "may be most fruitful if focusing on the relationship between preparation program quality features and candidates outcomes, most notably on-the-job leadership behaviors" (p. 266), while Korach and Cosner (2017) suggest that "the impact of collaborations between universities and school districts on the quality of leadership development is well documented" (p. 267).

The Challenge of Institutional Roles and Incentive Structures

Differences in knowledge commitments are further complicated by differences in faculty and school leader's roles and incentive structures. For the most part, faculty are promoted and recognized because of their empirical and conceptual research and national and international prominence achieved through publications and high profile national service (Lamagdeleine, Maxcy, Pounder, & Reed, 2009). Educational Leaders have historically lead from the middle of a set of competing interests and organizational bureaucracies and are incentivized to produce and perform leadership actions that are viewed positively in the local context (rather than national), are highly personal and interactive (rather than interacting with scholarship), and lead to more immediate and visible results (rather than slowly digested peer-reviewed scholarship) (Duke, 2015; Rousmaniere , 2014).

Lamagdeleine and colleagues (2009) argue for the development of incentive systems that incorporate the work that is valued by many in local communities, challenging universities to answer the question of "…how do one's empirical and conceptual research and publications, practitioner publications, outreach engagement with schools, and leadership preparation teaching form a synergistic whole?" (p. 137) They argue for a different set of incentives that create release

time, space, and resources to work with practitioners. While reports and publications in the last two decades reflect school administrators' concerns over the relevancy of higher education preparation and faculty members contemporary knowledge of work of schools (Hackman, et al., 2013; Levine, 2005), many educational leadership scholars have argued that multiple forms of knowledge are involved in leadership preparation. For example, some scholars have argued that theoretical, technical and practice knowledge are important components of professors' approach to leadership preparation (Davis, et al., 2005; Hallinger, 2014; Hackman, et al., 2013; Murphy, 2007; Pounder, 2011) and others posit that educational leadership programs should be involved in a wide variety of pre-service and post service preparation and professional development activities (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Danzig, Black, Donofrio, Fernandez, & Martin, 2012; Orr, 2011).

Opportunities in Knowledge Commitments

Foundations, School Districts and University Educational Leadership Faculty have been working to move beyond providing discrete preservice and inservice programs, but are moving towards a pipeline perspective. Korach and Cosner (2017) document the move towards a greater commitment to knowledge development around practices that take a pipeline perspective that

> calls for school leaders development to be enacted within the context of a more coherent system that forges deliberate linkages between principal preparation, development and support, and evaluation and where each of these elements is aligned to leader standards. Second, a pipeline perspective encourages partnerships between school districts and universities or other development providers to promote developmental designs that are more responsive to the leaders' professional contexts. (pp. 262-263)

In addition, knowledge of leadership has evolved from a focus on roles, to a networked and distributed understanding of leadership as centered around webs of interaction and influence (Seashore Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010; Spillane, 2005). Networks and alliances such as the ELPLA described in this article can provide the kind of social interaction that leads to the development of collective leadership and professional learning, as leaders become productively connected in developmentally appropriate ways. Such networks support communication, learning, and utilization of untapped resources between members of the community (Daly, 2010, Korach & Cosner, 2017). Well-facilitated professional learning communities can be important spaces for principals and school leaders to learning to improve instruction and increase student achievement gradually over time (Honig & Rainey, 2014).

In addition to learning about professional practices, networks and alliances can assist in reducing the social and emotional burden that often accompanies leadership work. In an era when many schools are labeled as failing and systems are labeled as mediocre, school leaders deal with many stressors as they are often placed in vulnerable and conflicted positions (Rogers-Chapman, 2015). On the university side, public funding has decreased leading to loss of faculty lines and the push to revisit roles and productivity, leading to additional stressors as well (Altbach, Gumport, & Berdahl, 2011). Pushes towards productivity and shifts in governance towards greater state-level oversight have led to a convergence of policies and pressures across both the k-12 and university contexts (Loss & McGuin, 2016). Networks can provide the kind of social-emotional and friendship supports that help work become more sustaining and meaningful (Deal, Purinton, & Waeton, 2009).

Opportunities to Begin to Reshape Institutional Roles and Incentive Structures

Recent legislative activity suggest a push towards more partnerships is likely as program approval is likely to hinge documented partnerships between university-based preparation programs and school districts (Fuller, Reynolds, & O'Doherty, 2017). This is reflected in recent legislative activity in Florida (Florida Department of Education, 2017) and other states. As will be described below in the article, the Wallace Foundation has also incentivized university-district partnerships among multiple large metropolitan districts (Turnbull, Riley, & MacFarlane, 2015). These efforts are consistent with research that supports universities and districts working together to select candidates and to place them in optimal positions (Orr & Pounder, 2011; Davis, et al., 2012). As well, current pressures on program enrollment in Educational Leadership programs and Colleges of Education, which have witnessed declining enrollment nationally over the last decade, suggest a shifting incentive landscape that is more likely to promote partnerships and conversations across universities and school districts, particularly as they relate to recruitment and training that is sensitive to school districts emerging needs (Goldhaber & Brown, 2016). As well, many school districts are becoming much more clear in articulating the need for comprehensive leadership development and are incentivized to partner and align their efforts with universities. Many of these efforts are particularly focused on staffing lower performing schools with highly qualified and diverse candidates (Fuller, et al., 2017; Korach & Cosner, 2017; Turnbull et al., 2015).

Methodological Approach

This reflective essay draws on the authors' recollection of ongoing interpretation and theorizing regarding collected data (Schwandt, 2001). We first reflected on the meaning and challenges of our practice through a series of ongoing verbal and written conversations between the authors themselves, as well as between the authors and participants over the past year. Guided by the authors, participants assisting in the reflection that directly tied to this article included three district leadership directors, 3 principals, 3 assistant principals, and 7 teacher leaders, and 3 current students all of whom would reflect on the history, meaning, and challenges of the Professional Learning Alliance at the beginning and end of meetings-all of which were captured in meeting notes. Most had Masters degrees or Doctoral degrees and some knowledge of thematic analysis and integration. Participants were also active practicing administrators who were well qualified to frame conversation toward the value of the PLA meetings in bridging to and reflecting on practice. In order to further substantiate and guide reflection on our practice, we analyzed collected notes on each of the quarterly Professional Learning Alliance meetings from 2013-2017, as well as drew from two reports submitted to the Wallace Foundation funded PLC initiative in 2012 and 2013. The authors highlighted critical incidences as well as conducted inductive thematic analysis of the notes and reports (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). We utilized participatory methods (Mirriam,1998) in order to illuminate how a professional learning alliance was developed and to discuss themes that are meaningful to participants. Our critical reflective approach allows for transferability and the ability to share perspectives that are useful for others to adapt to their environment (Yazan, 2015).

Creating the Educational Leadership Professional Learning Alliance

The Professional Learning Alliance originated from two major initiatives: that initially brought

together Leadership Development Directors from multiple Tampa Bay area school districts and Educational Leadership Faculty at the University of South Florida (USF): a). a successful application for federal flow through Florida Department of Education *Race to the Top* grant submitted by University of South Florida Educational Leadership Faculty and Leadership Development Directors from four school districts (Manatee, Pasco, Pinellas, and Polk county schools), which led to the establishment of an initiative named the Gulf Coast Partnership, and b.) a partnership with the Hillsborough County Public Schools Principal Pipeline Initiative, which was supported by a grant from the Wallace Foundation.

Gulf Coast Partnership

Six years ago, the University of South Florida Educational Leadership faculty initiated conversation with the school districts of Hillsborough, Pasco, Pinellas, Polk and Manatee to consider partnering on a *Race to the Top* grant application. The grant supported district and university leadership preparation partnerships that aimed to recruit highly successful instructional leaders to serve in "turnaround school" administrative roles. The grant targeted two stages of leadership development and training: 1.) a Masters program with a redesigned year long job-embedded administrative internship leading to initial Florida Educational Leadership Certification (Level 1) for aspiring Assistant Principals; and 2.) a non-degree year- long Principal Preparation program for Assistant Principals aspiring to earn Florida Educational Leadership Certification (Level 2) in order to become Principals. A primary goal of the grant was to engage the strongest candidates in a rigorous academic and intensive experiential program to distinguish them as exceptionally well-prepared beginning Assistant Principals and Principals. During the early stages of planning, the Hillsborough School District, the largest local district, declined to participate directly because they were beginning the implementing a Wallace Foundation sponsored *Principal Pipeline* initiative. The partners named themselves the Gulf Coast Partnership, with Hillsborough participating as a "conversation partner".

Level 1 program. The Level 1 Gulf Coast Partnership Job-Embedded Master's Program focused on targeted selection of instructional leaders; coursework responsive to district needs; a job-embedded year-long Administrative Internship; and district selected Mentor Principals. Graduates of the job-embedded Master's program completed a 15-month Master's level licensure program with a simultaneous school based job-embedded administrative internship. Upon graduation, the vast majority of graduates were immediately sought after and placed as Assistant Principals in High Needs Schools and Communities.[1] There were many examples of collective action between university faculty and district personnel, including examination and revision of syllabi, mentoring collaboratively in the field, co-teaching, and working together to solve issues around the internship.

Level 2 program. With the *Race to the Top* grant, the Gulf Coast Partnership districts selected current Assistant Principals for training and certification as Principals (Florida Educational Leadership Level 2). The program included ten full day sessions over the course of a

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[1] High-needs students are defined in the Race to the Top application as "Students at risk of educational failure or otherwise in need of special assistance and support, such as students who are living in poverty, who attend high-minority schools (as defined in the Race to the Top application), who are far below grade level, who have left school before receiving a regular high school diploma, who are at risk of not graduating with a diploma on time, who are homeless, who are in foster care, who have been incarcerated, who have disabilities, or who are English learners" (See http://www.ed.gov/race-top/district-competition/definitions).

year, with a focus on engaging, face-to-face learning that includes guest speakers, Principal Shadowing, Principal Panels, and a rigorous individual project. These *"residents"* also worked in cross-district, project-oriented groups, as well as grade level and district groups.

Speaking to the success of the Gulf Coast Partnership, during the previous 4 years the school districts of Pasco and Pinellas counties have dedicated Title II monies to support full-time job-embedded administrative interns in the Level 1 program after the *Race to the Top* funding ended. As such, a total of 61 individuals have been prepared through the GCP Level 1 program. Similarly, all four original districts, as well as three other districts have continued to participate in the Level 2 program and as of the summer of 2017, 262 individuals from 7 county-level school districts have completed the rigorous program. This multiyear process has resulted in the development of trusting relationships between the university faculty members and district personnel. Most of the original leadership development directors from the partnering districts in the Gulf Coast Partnership form a core of individuals who participate regularly in the quarterly Professional Learning Alliance conversations.

Hillsborough County Principal Pipeline Initiative

In 2011 the Hillsborough County School District became one of six large metropolitan school districts in the country to receive a multiyear Principal Pipeline Initiative grant from the Wallace Foundation (Wallace Foundation, 2013). A key requirement of the Principal Pipeline grant was to build and strengthen partnerships and accountability between the school district and the local universities that train and educate aspiring leaders that work in the district. The Wallace Foundation contracted with the consulting firm Educational Development Corporation (EDC) to utilize its Quality Measures process to evaluate preparation programs that work with the six originally funded Principal Pipeline Districts. As a result of being one of the primary providers of individuals with Florida Level 1 Certification for Hillsborough County Public Schools, in 2013 USF's Educational Leadership program was reviewed on 6 program measures consistent with research on effective program features (Crow & Whiteman, 2016; Orr, 2011): course content and pedagogy; clinical practices; recruitment and selection; graduate knowledge, skills, and competencies; graduate responsiveness to market demand; and graduate impact on school, teacher, and student performance. While we were initially distrustful of the "imposed" external evaluator and we saw the process as cumbersome and time consuming, the Quality Measures evaluation process did promote conversation between university faculty and district administrators around how to better align and improve leadership development programs and initiatives. In the end, the process promoted mutual respect and broke down some of the barriers around faculty and district roles and distinct cultural norms (Lamagdeleine, et al., 2009). This initiative also provided a small amount of seed money for ongoing partnership work, including establishing a local Professional Learning Community that later evolved into the Educational Leadership Professional Learning Alliance (ELPLA).

Formally Establishing Educational Leadership Professional Learning Alliance

The Gulf Coast Partnership Level 1 and Level 2 programs and the Hillsborough Leadership Pipeline work catalyzed productive relationships that led to the development of the Educational Leadership Professional Learning Alliance (ELPLA). The precursor to the ELPLA was a local Professional Learning Community initiated in 2013 through a partnership with USF and Hillsborough County

Public Schools (HCPS). Initiated in July, 2013 with a $9500 start- up grant from the Wallace Foundation through the Educational Development Corporation (the entity which had evaluated the program through the Quality Measures process), the initial local PLC focused on an examination of the results related to course content and pedagogy, student recruitment and selection, and program responsiveness to market demand. The original PLC consisted of twelve members, drawn from USF faculty, school leaders, leadership development directors, and recent program alumni. While the intent of the Wallace Foundation grant was to support three meetings in the fall of 2013, by the end of the semester, the original members felt that this was a purposeful, effective venue for ongoing collaboration. Accordingly, members expressed a desire to continue meeting through in a more expanded Professional Learning Alliance. In the spring of 2014 the Educational Leadership Professional Learning Alliance (ELPLA) was initiated. Several years later many original members remain even as more have come onboard as 35 individuals currently attend one or more meetings per year.

The ELPLA includes members in a variety of roles, including teacher leaders, semi-administrative support staff, Assistant Principals, Principals, District-Level Leadership Development directors and Assistant Superintendents. The alliance continues to sustain itself and grow through a practice in which members ask a colleague who might be interested to come to the meeting and join in on the discussions. The alliance members have crafted and formally accepted the following guiding tenets: Purpose: To increase opportunities to collaborate for the purpose of bridging preparation and practice; Vision: To provide wraparound support for leadership development as an influential network; and Mission: Through meaningful collaboration and honest dialogue, we will focus on enhancing the success of students and educational leaders.

Educational Leadership and Professional Learning Alliance meetings and network are valued for three primary reasons: to inform preparation through incorporating voices of practitioners, to provide a platform to organically respond to topical needs of leadership practice, and to create a community of trust and support. Following the work of the Wallace funded PLC, the initial ELPLA meetings provided University Professors feedback on their program practices in areas of recruitment and selection, curriculum and clinical practice, and market needs and career placement outcomes. All of the ELPLA members have expressed interest in supporting the growth and development of the program and these topics continue to be discussed in the monthly meetings. In addition, members have demonstrated interest in developing their knowledge in areas that emerge in the field and a series of discussions have emerged in response to practitioner interests. These discussions are led by a variety of members as well as invited faculty members and graduate students. Topics for discussion have included resiliency and well-being, trauma and schools, growing leaders beyond standards, ownership of learning, appreciative inquiry and organizing in education, and English Language Learners and Biculturalism. In terms of creating a community, we often found ourselves discussing transitions and trust, as well as creating a space for support where we can share our losses and celebrate our successes. In the end, we found mutual benefits in the ELPLA as members strive to enhance our network to promote public education, create national contacts through membership in a national research consortium, and commit to be responsive to the needs of the group members.

Sustaining the Educational Leadership Learning Alliance

Learning Something New: Collectively Analyzing Preparation Through Practice

The initial Professional Learning Community convened in September of 2013 in order to improve articulation between the school district and the university strategies to: improve candidate recruitment and selection; continually develop depth and relevancy of course content and pedagogy, including the internship experience; and respond to market demands in ways that support individuals' growth across the different pathways in their career. These continue to be areas of emphasis for the ELPA, as they are vital to preparation program improvement and benefit from collaboration across arenas in order to develop more comprehensive leadership development (Korach & Cosner, 2017; Orr, 2011).

Recruitment and selection. Who should be recruited? How might high quality candidates be recruited? The members of the ELPA have consistently noted the lack of marketing resources and the need for USF needs to focus on marketing the value of their program. Ideas have included meeting with local superintendents and as well as having teacher leaders identified by current administrators and alumni in order to attend an information session presented by USF. The group emphasized continued recruitment of a greater diversity of applicants, as well as those candidates willing and able to go to "high-needs" schools. In a related vein, the group urged recruitment and selection of individuals who think critically, skillfully question what is taken for granted, and be able to take risk. Currently, alumni who participate in ELPLA also attend recruitment fairs and effectively promote the university as a premier leadership preparation program.

Another recommendation is to continue to have university presence with district leaders, finding ways to interact and be present through our continued Gulf Coast Partnership activities. One other suggestion was to look for leaders in districts and those who have exhibited community leadership, which we incorporated into our Ed.S. in Turnaround School Leadership program. With the resurrection of our Ed.S. program, we have targeted options for those who might seek district leadership rather than school based leadership development only.

Some suggestions that have been constant but not consistent for all programs include: (1) conducting interviews using targeted selection type questions (our master's level GCP Program does this); (2) involve current leaders in the selection process as is done in both our GCP and Ed.S. programs; and (3) use a 360 degree survey of candidate's colleagues as part of selection process. As a result, we have begun to do what was not done previously: screen graduates/applicants together with districts in an attempt to align the qualities of USF graduates with district needs.

As a part of the collaboration engendered through the ELPLA, faculty members have been invited to participate in the screening process of graduates who apply to enter Hillsborough's Principal Pipeline. This screening activity is also beneficial to faculty, as it provides insight how to better prepare our students for successful administrative screening during their final coursework and internship. There is a desire to increase collaboration with districts to ensure that USF graduates have an advantage in administrative screening.

Curriculum and clinical practice. What should be taught? How might the internship be structured more meaningfully? By first forming a PLC and then the ELPA, we seek meaningful input on course content and pedagogy, as we had done under the Gulf Coast Partnership. There were strengths identified for the program, including classes that capture and present contemporary research that has application to project assignments. In the best scenario, one participant who just finished the coursework commented: "I have never done an assignment I could not use at work". Others noted that the program of study is diverse enough to meet most of the needs of educational leaders. Nevertheless, we solicited input on areas for further development. They noted that more focus is needed on explicit models or processes of problem solving, such as Response to Intervention so that administrators know steps to use could be incorporated into specific classes.

As is common in the literature, the internship was seen as a high impact activity that could be enhanced (Davis, et al., 2005; Fry, O'Neil, & Bottoms, 2005; Pounder, 2004; Wallace Foundation, 2013). Much of our discussion has focused around the internship and the collaboration across universities and k-12 schools. In looking at the role of the internship, suggestions were solicited concerning how to provide more rigorous, relevant and authentic experiences. Some ideas included developing the capacity of administrators to mentor interns, to fund ways to provide release time for interns to shadow administrators and to reorganize the framework of the internship to include advocacy leadership for students of diverse backgrounds. It was also suggested that interns might design major projects aligned with district needs and initiatives. Such an approach would provide interns with a broader concept of implementing change and it would provide them with a meaningful portfolio of work that better demonstrates their preparation for future administrative positions. During their coursework or internship, students should be called upon to implement a plan for a low performing school, as that is where the need is located. Additionally, leadership development directors asked university faculty to seek out diverse clinical placements, when possible.

As a result of our discussions around course content and internship, many members suggested that USF provide a longer, more structured internship with increased opportunities for shadowing outstanding leaders. As a result of this input, the program went from a one semester to a full year administrative internship. In addition, there have been multiple discussions around preparing administrative interns for leadership positions other than the principalship and the one-year internship allows for application of knowledge in multiple roles.

Other suggestions included having interns conduct a program evaluation coming to understand what the impact is of their approaches, so that they come to know the positive and negative effects. An important point is how might interns learn to translate both positive and negative learning experiences into future administrative work. There were discussions around interns' roles in a creating meaningful School Improvement Plan, where interns could demonstrate application of skills and theories as learning leaders. Members also called for more attention to effectively leveraging community and parent involvement, as many schools utilize a very traditional school-centered role of parent involvement. This might imply identifying principals and sites that actively engage community and providing those models and case studies to the students.

Through its series of meetings, a discussion thread wove around an area that is ignored because of legal concerns around evaluation: how to train a yet to be licensed administrative intern to conduct a quality observation. Participants suggested that this would necessitate crafting formal agreements with districts that would allow these pre-service administrators to learn how to use the tools of the district and to norm them to build inter-rater reliability. Even if they are not responsible for supervision during the internship, students can practice supporting an individual through an instructional coaching cycle. Lastly, district leaders and alumni clearly expressed a desire for candidates who can build capacity and lead meaningful professional development rather than following the too common practice of hiring a vendor, which often lacks relevance or is not sustainable.

Market and career advancement outcomes. In our meetings, faculty have been able to gather and then share data on graduate placement and performance with school-based leaders in the ELPLA. We shared program completion data with the group that was based on Florida's classification of USF Educational Leadership graduates during the past ten years, compared with their current position. Data were reflective of three school districts: Hillsborough, Pasco and

Hernando. PLC participants indicated that they thought the trends could be generalized to other school districts such as Pinellas and Polk.

As we reflect on this practice, we have found it to be beneficial in formative evaluation of our educational leadership program. Graduates' placement in positions was very revealing. It has continued to inform our collaboration around placement of graduates in positions of greater influence, as well as assisted in promoting better alignment through various stages of leadership development in the university and school district settings. There seemed to be consensus that programs should not be judged on the percentage of people who become AP's or Principals, but that individuals who completed USF's Educational Leadership program were could contribute in various ways as teacher leaders, resource teachers, mentors and district personnel.

It was not surprising, but a bit problematic that the pipeline from graduation to an administrative position is long – many times more than five years. Participants seemed to feel that in many instances, some Educational Leadership graduates return to the classroom for numerous reasons and do not seek administrative positions. Some of these include the reluctance to give up tenure for an annual contract, the uncertainty with Florida's Value-Added Model (VAM), and graduates possibly lacking the people skills to handle administrative challenges. In addition, the lengthy post-graduation application, selection, and training process undertaken by various school districts (nine months to a year after graduation) postpone highly qualified applicants from taking a position. A direct outcome of these discussions is that one district is now screening and providing district-based training to our masters students while they are in the program, and aligning the training with sequenced masters course content. This has cut time for the time for highly qualified program graduates to reach assistant principal positions by one full year.

The alliance members arrived at collective conclusion that as the state begins to evaluate programs based on placement metrics, it is important that programs not be judged on the percentage of people who become AP's or Principals. All agreed that those individuals that went through the program were better prepared to contribute in various ways as teacher leaders, resource teachers, mentors, and district personnel. They argued that as a field we should find ways of measuring contributions of those who do not become school-based APs or Principals. The master's program should not be limited to principal preparation, but to leadership in education more broadly. One county uses the term flattening leadership to indicate that leadership should never be conceptualized as belonging to a role, but rather an administrator, along with others, help to develop a cadre of leaders in a school.

Alumni were asked what they considered to be advantages of being a graduate of USF as compared with other degree granting institutions. Their thoughts included the fact that the program is not one of compliance, but rather one that provides rigor, networking and preparation for working with students from diverse backgrounds. This is especially meaningful in light of the fact that many districts have more Title I schools than others, and most beginning administrators are placed in Title I schools. It was mentioned that being able to establish relationships and having good communication skills were also part of the focus in USF's M.Ed. program. This feedback was then used in the recruitment fairs and other recruitment information.

Areas for potential for growth were identified and included planning strategically with districts with individuals at different stages in their preparation with a particular emphasis on "high needs" schools in the program. Diverse clinical placements would help, as well as analysis that determines characteristics of successful individual pathways in high needs schools so that the program can be better aligned to an operational definition of who tends to do well. Current issues faced by districts that continue to be discussed include implementation of the RtI process, the use

of data from formative assessments to improve instruction, school culture and academic engagement of students, and building the capacity of professionals via the coaching process.

Learning Something New: Collectively Engaging Issues Emerging in Practice

Topics for discussion have varied and have included resiliency and well-being, engaging students, the arts and disability, trauma and schools, growing leaders beyond standards, ownership of learning, appreciative inquiry and organizing in education, building positive school culture, and English Language Learners and Bilingualism. In the following sections we provide highlights of the types of information sharing processes we collectively engaged in around of four topics that were introduced by a wide range of ELPLA members: trauma and schools, growing leaders beyond standards, appreciative inquiry and organizing in education, and English Language learners and bilingualism.

     Trauma and schools. ELPLA members discussed how their best intentions to promote learning too often became tangled with students' need to work through many traumatic incidences in their lives. Practicing administrators in one meeting discussed how emotionally draining their work can be when working with students and families that have experienced trauma and that more children in their schools are exposed to traumatic events than most people realize. While some trauma is easily recognizable due to a death or natural disaster many not easily recognized forms of trauma can dramatically impact how children experience schools and come with dramatic changes in behavior, mood, and ability to learn. Gerritty & Folcarelli, 2008, go so far as to suggest that untreated trauma is the root cause of most pressing problems" that schools and communities face: "crime, low academic achievement, addiction, mental health problems and poor health outcomes" (p. 5).

     When the request was made to provide a session on the effects of a chaotic and unstable environment (toxic stress) on students and the implications for schools a faculty member in counseling education and a certified mental health therapist, provided information for ELPA members. His presentation included discussion, demonstration of sand trays and other manipulatives that can be used by educators who encounter students suffering from abuse, homelessness, parent incarceration, drug abuse, and domestic violence. Dr. Davis also shared a database of reference materials for educator use. Classroom teachers, administrators and district leaders were all at the table, making connections to their practice.

     As hoped, the impact was not limited to this specific discussion. For example, one ELPLA member, who was teaching a class in the Ed.S. program on Turn-Around School Leadership, realized the possible implications for including the topic of trauma-sensitive schools in the Issues in Curriculum and Instruction course. The class was composed of current principals and district administrators who had not explored a framework of topics to be considered in designing an approach that would fit the context of a particular school and meet the needs of students. Using the work of Cole, Eisner, Gregory, and Ristuccia (2013), the ELPA member helped guide discussion of the following issues and their connection to creating an adaptive model for a trauma-sensitive environment: Leadership, Professional Development, Services, Strategies, Policies, and Family Engagement. Leadership development directors from two districts not only incorporated information from the session in principal professional development in their district, but were sparked to look up more information and distribute it to leaders in their districts. Information from this session was also incorporated into principal professional development They realized how prevalent trauma is in schools, with 25% of the population reporting at least two adverse childhood

experiences (Centers of Disease Control and Prevention, 1998), and it has become an important topic for school leaders to consider.

Growing leaders beyond standards. In one of the earlier sessions that drew on the data on program outcomes and discussion of recruitment and selection, the Learning Alliance members discussed how a handful of educational leadership programs in the state were providing quick and low quality master's programs and were growing in enrollment, sometimes as a detriment to our program. We discussed how some of the issues they were concerned about were shared nationally - Baker, Orr, & Young (2007) reported that there was a steep decline in the role that research universities play in the production of master's, specialist, and doctoral degrees in education. More recent data on graduate degree production in educational administration indicates that "major research universities continue to play a declining role in the production of graduate degrees (all levels) in education administration" (Baker, 2012), and a recent study of various state licensure policy and institutional production across 4 states, including Florida, demonstrated continued concentration of production in newer, more entrepreneurial and less research intensive contexts (Black & Danzig, 2016).

In our particular context, we discussed various overlapping factors and potential actions. Declines in enrollment were more pronounced after all surrounding districts removed stipends for graduate degrees and general wariness with investing in education due to the effects of the recent recession. As an organization, ELPLA members came to understand some dynamics and vulnerabilities of shifting contexts in Educational Leadership, we identified mutual goals as public institutions, and members committed to redoubling efforts to recruit and promote our program as a rigorous and responsive program (as exemplified by the existence of the partnerships and feedback received in the ELPLA meetings). Slowly, enrollment has been trending upward. Nevertheless, this is a frequent topic and members help faculty to consider why potential students are choosing other institutions and we discuss how we might recruit together.

Appreciative inquiry and organizing in education. ELPLA members came to understand that we were incorporating an appreciative inquiry approach into our masters, Ed.S. and level 2 programs and that we had developed a class on Appreciative Inquiry and Organizing in Education. They were intrigued by the approach and requested that we discuss the approach in one of our meetings.

As a result, we organized a session focused on asset-based approaches to leadership that are informed by literature on Appreciative Inquiry. Appreciative Inquiry Theory (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Mantel & Ludema, 2004) provides an alternative framework for improving schools by building upon on already present organizational assets and capacity. The session organizer directs the Level 2 leadership development program for the USF Anchin Center in partnership with school districts is a co-author on a text that developed an Appreciative Organizing in Education (AOE) framework (Burrello, Betz, & Mann, 2015). The framework begins with a focus on assets rather than a focus on deficits as it seeks to utilize the positive strength based approach embedded in Appreciative Inquiry theory in order to develop relational leaders that build transcendent purpose and core values and generative learning systems (Black, Burrello, & Mann, 2017).

This approach was well received, as many of the ELPLA members work in or with lower performing or "turnaround" public schools. As we discussed in the session, an AOE stance means leaders do not focus on the all too often common and destructive narratives of pathology and deficit thinking in students, families, and school communities (Valencia, 2015), but rather work on how to identify positive assets and harness the potential in their schools and communities to create a hopeful and engaged future for the students and themselves. ELPA members reported

feeling invigorated and several reached out for more information after the session. A high school assistant principal in attendance immediately incorporated an appreciative approach in the student leadership academy and worked with her principal to utilize the approach in strategic planning for the next academic year.

English Language Learners and bilingualism. Although the Tampa Bay area has had a history of immigrant communities, recent demographic shifts and a growing recognition of differences between the background knowledge of educators and the students they serve were highlighted in several meetings. The complexity of the issue and need for both background knowledge and explicit strategies led to a request for information. As a result, a doctoral student and one of the authors led a discussion on English Language Learners (ELLs) and bilingualism.

We began be setting the context of shifts in demographics in the nation as well as in Florida and the Tampa Bay area. In Florida, we discussed performance of ELLS in various grade levels and shared data on test performance, graduation rates, retention, and teacher capacity. In addition, we discussed how 73% of English Language Learner students had Spanish as their home language, with Haitian Creole (8.2%) being the next most common language (Florida Department of Education, 2015). We also took on the timely issue of the immigrant community in the strongly nativist Trump administration, most particularly documented reports of increasing anti-immigrant speech in communities and schools, clear evidence that immigrants are much less likely to commit crimes, fear from kids that their family members would be reported to Immigration and Custom Enforcement, and suspicion of public gathering leading immigrants to remain "underground" (Costello, 2017; Pérez-Peña, 2017). Accordingly, we discussed the important calming role schools can play for their kids and the legal and moral obligations that school leaders need to consider and embrace. In order to contextualize the discussion, we also provided a larger historical context-particularly the notions that many schools were bilingual in the United States until the 1920's. Since that time, the country has swung between assimilationist and accomodationist stances with landmark cases and legislation, such as the Bilingual Education Act of 1968 (Crawford, 2001; Dueñas Gónzalez & Meliz, 2001; Stritikus, 2002).

In order to expand the horizon of possibilities we also reviewed many different bilingual education and English as a Second Language approaches and specific strategies and research on the efficacy of the approaches, including research that shows benefits of bilingualism (Brisk, 2006; Athanasopoulos, et al., 2015). We highlighted where and how districts had positive trends in ELL enrollment in advanced classes, and research on essential elements of effective ESOL and bilingual education programs. The idea for the session was to discuss and contextualize the broader historical, sociocultural and policy dimensions around immigrant students as well as research on both dual language approaches and ESOL instruction that provided some concrete models and strategies that ELPLA members could take home to help teachers and administrators better serve multilingual students (de Jong, 2014). Members left with resources that they could use in their practice and we are using some material developed for the presentation in a new partnership with Polk county schools.

Discussion and Lessons Learned: Finding Mutual Benefit and Sustaining Momentum

Collectively Creating a Community of Trust

During meetings in 2016, the PLA members identified a common phenomenon that they were experiencing regardless of district or role: the need to deal with transitions in their professional

lives. Responding to clearly expressed and pressing affective needs to unpack and learn how best to handle turbulence and transitions in their lives, the ELPLA seems to provide a forum for recent graduates, administrators assigned to schools new to them, current students, and leadership development directors to discuss significant changes in their individual roles and shifts in district priorities. During the discussions, an often-heard term was trust, especially in the context of relationships and how to best develop trust in a turbulent system. Trust was also what brought us together several years ago, as we searched for an effective way to remove barriers between the university and local districts, while focusing on the strengths of each entity. We have come full-circle, from a cross-section of educators who assembled to write a grant to a thought partner group of university and district educators who find value in continuing a relationship built on trust.

Building Support: Sharing our Losses and Celebrating Our Success

One of the interesting themes is the way in which members have related that they look forward to the meetings as therapeutic-as means of releasing frustrations, sharing emotional journeys of losses (of student lives, of professional opportunities, of feeling of having a voice) what often people cannot say within the constraints of their roles and institutional context. It has been helpful to share issues across a network of individuals in various positions in multiple districts. In our reflection on our notes and agenda, we have come to believe that members minimize any evaluation of each other despite having multiple roles and levels of experiences, as they are able to appreciate each others' perspectives and identify broader, more systemic issues and struggles beyond their school or role. Students and recent alumni very rarely get to sit and discuss issues with district office personnel and principals in an open manner. Similarly, as professors we do not have the opportunity to share similar frustrations around University policies and procedures and to share successes in terms of promotions, small victories in the classroom, family successes, and research that is published that relates to members' lives.

Enhancing Commitment to Engage Our Network to Promote Public Education

While there are differences in university incentive systems and those of school districts and often value commitments have long been distinct (Grogan & Andrews, 2002; Korach & Cosner, 2017), in one meeting it was clear that during our discussions of budget retrenchment, narratives of defeat around public schools, and efforts to make universities accountable through relatively narrow human capital accountability metrics, that university faculty and district directors have many converging interests as public educational institutions are now under common threats. One of interesting points of reflection across all organizational contexts is the realization of the interests we share as educators in at K-24 public system that is being increasingly challenged by an array of privatization initiatives and shifting governance structures in which educators have less decision-making power (Altbach, et al., 2011; Henig, 2013, Reckhow & Snyder, 2018).

Ongoing Commitment to Be Responsive to the Needs of the Group

The value of trusting relationships was evident during one session when a district leader lamented the need for principals in her district to develop resilience to be able to handle the demands of the state, district, teachers, parents, students, community, etc. This honest sharing led to an active discussion from other district leaders and ELPLA members concerning the universal need for

districts to support strategies that promote efficacy for its administrators. In response, one of the group's school administrators offered to research the subject and share her findings. As a result, *Resilient school leaders: Strategies for turning adversity into achievement* by Jerry Patterson and Paul Kelleher was the subject of an ELPLA book study, which in turn became a resource for districts, university faculty and teacher leaders. A direct impact of the discussion was the use of the text in Polk County principal training the following year. The impact of the trusting relationships continues to perpetuate ELPLA to new arenas. As such, the linkages that are being cultivated are consistent with a well-articulated principal or leadership pipeline that encourages more personalized leadership development across both K-12 and Higher Education contexts that builds from prior preparation and responds to emerging developmental needs. As Korach & Cosner (2017) note, such efforts align with school based practices "in ways that address key limitations of ongoing leader development" (p. 268).

Conclusion

The impact of the group and the importance of it to the members was apparent on the morning of the last meeting of 2016. Inadvertently, ELPLA had been scheduled on a Saturday when there was a major event at the university and the campus was closed to outside traffic. When we realized what was happening and had resigned ourselves to having few, if any people attend ELPLA, we finally reached the meeting location only to realize that nothing will keep ELPLA members from a session – the attendance was the best for the year. Many comments were heard around the theme of "nothing will keep us from seeing each other", as determined members found a way around barriers.

The Educational Leadership Professional Learning Alliance has become an arena where members trust each other. They express concerns as well as strategies for moving forward personally and professionally without feeling judged or evaluated, which too often happens in their professional lives. Our collaborative efforts have catalyzed efforts to develop effective ways to remove barriers between the university and local districts, while focusing on the strengths of each entity. While there is much work to be done, the ELPLA has begun to attend to aspects of community that intentionally attempt to break through institutional barriers (Block, 2009). In particular,

The ELPLA also reflects elements found in a review of successful partnering: pragmatic approaches rather than idealized stances; comfort with incremental change: building trust through explicitly addressed framework of shared values and aspirations; commitment and capacity building over time from both partners; utilizing less hierarchical approaches in which all voices are heard so that the group develops a kind of third space that is distinct from both academia as well as K-12 education (Greany, Gu, Handscomb, & Varley, 2014).

Currently, the initial cross-section of educators who assembled for two specific externally leveraged purposes: to write a Race to the Top grant application, and to respond to an evaluation process funded by the Wallace Foundation, have evolved into a more organic alliance fueled by the needs and desires of the members for a safe, secure forum to discuss issues of mutual concern and share knowledge across institutional contexts. These activities continue to serve as crucial bridge to an important component in education: the development of district-university partnerships that promote a shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice (Burns, Jacobs, Baker, & Donahue, 2016; Korach & Cosner, 2017; Sanzo, Meyers, & Clayton, 2011).

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