

A Modified Administrative Internship: Can It Meet the Objectives of a Traditional Internship for Preparing Future Leaders?

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Abstract

Administrative internships providing field-based experiences are identified as an effective practice in school leadership preparation programs. However, including internships of 15 weeks with full-time on-the-job requirements is problematic in programs where students primarily work full-time. This study investigated the capacity of a modified internship approach—field-based activities and fewer hours—to achieve similar outcomes as a traditional internship. The longitudinal qualitative study involved five cohorts ($n = 60$) of graduate students in a Master of Educational Leadership program in Canada over five years (2019-2023). Participants completed a qualitative survey after their required internship course, and the data were analyzed using a conventional and summative qualitative content analysis approach. The findings determined that participants overwhelmingly agreed that the modified administrative internship structure effectively provided authentic experiences about the reality of school leadership roles and responsibilities and prepared them better for the role. The consistent findings spanning over five years support the validity of the modified approach, aligning with traditional internships' goals. Leadership preparatory programs seeking to enhance the preparation of future school leaders may benefit from adopting a similar field-based course structure as the modified internship approach.

Keywords: modified administrative internship, longitudinal study, school leader preparation, field-based experiences

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The importance of school leaders and their ability to lead has been—and even more so post-pandemic—a focal point of discussion and concern. Many leadership-preparatory organizations, from universities to specific leadership development groups (e.g., the Wallace Foundation), Ministries of Education, and school districts, agree school leaders play a vital role in setting the direction for successful schools, and consequently, they must be well-prepared. Therefore, continuous studies of school leadership preparation programs' content, approach, and effectiveness are essential to provide adequate and appropriate leadership development.

Nearly a decade ago, Levine (2006) declared educational administration programs to be the weakest of all the programs at the education level. Davis et al. (2005) added that “existing knowledge on the best ways to prepare and develop highly qualified candidates is sparse” (p. x). These comments are weakened by the dearth of research conducted on school leadership preparation programs; however, Davis and Darling-Hammond (2012) stressed the ongoing emphasis on the skills and abilities of school principals and the program quality to prepare school leaders continues to be intense, with particular interest in including field-based experiences or internships. Numerous studies advocated for including more prac-

tical experiences, with many programs adding an administrative internship and conducting research on their effectiveness (Barnett, 2004; Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Clayton & Myran, 2013; Cunningham & Sherman, 2008; Jamison & Clayton, 2016; Milstein & Krueger, 1997; Newell, 1956; Orr & Orphanos, 2011; Perez et al., 2011; Roach et al., 2011; Sherman & Crum, 2009; Thessin & Clayton, 2013; Wilson, 2014). While there continue to be critiques about and discrepancies among the structure and design of administrative internships, there is a consensus they offer invaluable preparatory experiences for aspiring leaders. Jamison and Clayton (2016) noted, “Gaining a deeper understanding of the experiences of administrative interns can lead to improved preparation” (p. 515).

Despite a large and growing number of studies highlighting the value of the internship, the format can be problematic for many Canadian programs because of students’ time constraints and inability to pause their full-time work. Thus, this study differentiated between traditional and modified internships. I adopted the two terms *traditional* and *modified* to signify the different approaches to the internship: Traditional was used to depict an internship requiring students to stop their full-time work and complete an on-the-job experience full-time (i.e., during the school day). Modified was used to describe an internship consisting of part-time hours and simultaneously completed while continuing one’s full-time work commitment and mostly independently with some mentor assistance in a course-based field experience.

This research aimed to validate the effectiveness of a modified internship (i.e., with fewer hours and independent with some mentored-assisted field-based experiences), aiming to achieve similar objectives as the traditional internship. Specifically, the modified internship aimed to confirm three objectives based on the same expectations as a traditional one. They were: (a) if the format could authentically replicate the roles and responsibilities of school leaders (b) effectively prepare participants for future leadership roles, and (c) provide a space to bridge theory and practice. The study was conducted over five years (2019-2023) with five different cohorts (n = 60 participants) of students taking a required (modified) administrative internship course in a Master of Science in Education Leadership Program (MSED). This longitudinal study provided empirical evidence affirming the validity and effectiveness of the modified internship approach in preparing future school leaders, suggesting their adoption in Canadian leadership preparation programs.

Literature Review: A Brief Overview of Administrative Internships

Purpose

Since the 1950s (e.g., Newell, 1956), administrative internships have been planned and evaluated within school leadership preparation programs. Many leadership preparation programs have integrated a field-based component known as the internship (Deschaine & Jankens, 2017). Over time, the primary purpose of the internship has remained consistent: providing aspiring leaders with authentic and genuine opportunities to engage in the practice of administrative instructional leadership and decision-making (Clayton & Myran, 2013). Many scholars and practitioners agree with this purpose, particularly when the internship practices align with coursework (Perez et al., 2011). Some argue the internship is considered the most essential component of principal preparation (Anderson & Reynolds, 2015; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Orr & Orphanos, 2011). An exemplary internship is often characterized by a field-based opportunity to put into practice, under the guidance of a skilled mentor, leadership knowledge and skills (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Davis et al., 2005; Milstein & Krueger, 1997; Orr, 2011) enabling candidates to problem solve, bridge theory into practice, and to experience the day-to-day realities faced by practicing school leaders (Thessin et al., 2020).

Context and Structure

The structure and content of an internship can vary widely depending on institutional or local accreditation requirements for school leadership, thus leading to critiques about its specificity. Generally, an internship entails (a) completing a substantive field experience within a school setting, (b) working with a mentor, (c) a set number of supervised hours, and (d) an opportunity to bridge connections between the candidate’s classroom learning and real-life context and situations in the school setting (Thessin & Clayton, 2013). Conceptually, it serves as preparation for a leadership position, offering an opportunity to broaden the experiential perspective of the role and responsibilities of a school leader and an oppor-

tunity to facilitate self-assessment of one's leadership philosophy under the direction and guidance of a mentor (i.e., an experienced leader). While specific components are unique to each university and leadership preparation program, Fry et al. (2005) identified in their review of 61 educational administration preparation programs deemed exemplary,

a structured internship focused on essential competencies for leading curriculum, instruction, and student achievement. Internships in school leadership are organized around school achievement problems and research on effective school and classroom practices. Creating such a program involves working closely with local districts to analyze needs, select and prepare mentor principals and arrange day-to-day supervision, evaluation, and feedback regarding interns' performance. (p. xx)

Regarding specific task structures, administrative internships typically involve assignments and reflections on management, operations, and instructional leadership. Fry et al. (2005) emphasized the importance of focusing on leading curriculum and student achievement (leadership tasks) in addition to the management responsibilities of a principal (administrative tasks) so that integrating both leadership and administrative tasks makes for a better internship experience.

Despite much research showing the effectiveness of internships in leadership preparation programs, there continues to be some concerns about their limitations in implementing the traditional (i.e., a student is required to fulfill day-to-day attendance in the workplace as an intern) format. These include inconsistent hour requirements, the sustained nature of those hours, the activities conducted within the internship, protocols for reflection, and faculty supervision. Other areas of criticism include weak connections between curriculum and interns being tasked with menial as they passively log hours until completion (Dishman & Redish, 2011; Fry et al., 2005; Gray et al., 2022; Levine, 2006). While specific requirements of pre-service educational leadership programs are established, discrepancies and variations continue to exist in the administrative internship (Roach et al., 2011). Therefore, ongoing research continues to establish the effectiveness and format of the traditional administrative internship in leadership preparatory programs. Finding the best format and approach to reduce limitations is an ongoing area of investigation. This study adds empirical evidence from a unique approach by implementing a modified internship and testing it over five years with five different groups of students.

The Role of the Mentor

A recurring theme found in the internship literature is the importance of and the role of the mentor. Deschaine and Jankens (2017) emphasized, "The school-based mentor is considered a critical component to ensure internship programs for school administrators are successful" (p. 9). Specifically, in leadership preparation programs, especially in administrative internships – mentees rely on school-based or district-based mentors to supervise and support them during their leadership experiences in the real-world setting (Thessin et al., 2020). According to Thessin and Clayton (2013), school district mentor administrators ensure that the administrative interns experience authentic situations.

The mentor's role and responsibilities in an administrative internship are pivotal for the intern's success in achieving the internship's objectives and goals. Therefore, creating a solid mentor-intern relationship is essential for students to have a practicum experience that adequately prepares them for school leadership. However, it is necessary to point out that the student or the program does not directly control the quality of the mentor-intern relationship. Extensive research has been completed on frameworks for quality mentor-mentee relationships (Geismar et al., 2000). For example, Thessin et al. (2020) created the Educational Leadership Mentoring Framework based on their findings that "intern and mentors first establish the partnership, then cultivate the mentoring relationship, and finally engage in learning through the leadership experience" (p. 47). While the mentor-intern relationship was not the objective of this study, students identified them as important to their internship outcomes.

Program Scheduling

Ideally, the internship schedule should be full-time (i.e., the candidate has no other job commitments), allowing interns to fully immerse themselves in the school environment, experiencing the day-to-day

school dynamics across various parts of the school year and during demanding leadership periods. A full-time internship commitment would allow the candidate to be present in real-time for all opportunities, providing the intern with a genuine, authentic school leadership experience. However, achieving this ideal is often deemed unrealistic, as in many Canadian leadership preparation programs, the students are employed full-time and usually have no feasible means to suspend their current jobs.

Consequently, a common challenge in a traditional administrative internship is accommodating working students with schedule options tailored to their needs. Nonetheless, as noted by Hackman et al. (1999), "It is difficult to provide quality experiences that permit theory-practice connections when the student is juggling employment, graduate study, clinical requirements, and family obligations" (p.1). In addition to time constraints, the duration of the internship is a critical consideration. Many researchers agree that for the internship to be authentic and practical, it should be a full-time experience over time (Wilmore & Bratlien, 2005). For example, according to Rolinitis (2015)

The intern needs to work directly with a mentor over a prolonged period, allowing them to observe what happens in an administrator's day-to-day life, practice in authentic situations, ask meaningful questions about situations that arise, reflect with the mentor's guidance, and do all of this in a safe, consistent environment. (p. 87)

The criteria outlined for a high-quality internship is providing an authentic learning experience toward becoming a school leader. It should provide the candidate with responsibilities of leading, facilitating, and making decisions typical of an educational leader and should develop an educational leader's perspective on school improvement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Davis et al., 2005; Leithwood et al., 1996; Orr & Orphanos, 2011; Young & Crow, 2017). The primary role of the internship should be to socialize the candidate to the principalship (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004). While there are competing arguments about the length and structure of internships, most educational experts have agreed that the internship should be full-time and job-embedded (Barnett et al., 2009; Carr et al., 2003; Young & Crow, 2017). In addition, a high-quality internship should involve regular supervision of the candidate in conjunction with a highly skilled school leader (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Cordeiro & Sloan, 1996; Davis et al., 2005; Geismar et al., 2000; Sosik et al., 2005; Swaminathan & Reed, 2020).

Overall, according to existing research, school leaders who have undergone administrative internships exhibit better leadership practices, demonstrating the importance of including field experiences such as those in the administrative internship in leadership preparation programs (Cordeiro & Sloan, 1996; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Orr, 2011; Orr & Barber, 2006; Orr & Orphanos, 2011; Young & Crow, 2017). Balancing the need for a meaningful practicum experience with students' existing commitments is essential yet challenging and may compromise the impact and outcomes of the internship's objectives. Therefore, this research aimed to evaluate whether a modified administrative internship approach, considering the recommendations of a traditional one, could achieve the same or similar benefits.

Canadian University-based Leadership Perpetration Programs

The preparation of school principals varies widely across countries (Brundrett, 2001; Cowie & Crawford, 2007; Hallinger, 2003). For example, in many university-level administrator preparation programs in the United States, the administrative internship is the culminating capstone experience. The internship offers aspiring school leaders the opportunity for practical experiences for understanding the realities of being a school or district-level leader (Barnett, 2004; Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Cunningham & Sherman, 2008; Orr & Orphanos, 2011; Roach et al., 2011; Sherman & Crum, 2009). In New York state, for example, to become a school-building or district leader in New York, candidates must complete an accredited master's program (i.e., approved by the governing state certification body, including a state exam for leadership certification and two separate 300-hour internships. Unlike the United States, where university-based programs and state exams are commonly used for school leadership preparation and certification, Canada does not have a similar structure. Requirements for school leadership preparation vary across the Canadian provinces; some require teaching experience and a master's degree,

while others mandate certification through established organizations like the Ontario College of Teachers (2024). Consequently, Canadian university-based master's degree programs are more course-based and less likely to include internship opportunities. However, recent research-based evidence highlighting principals' increased challenges (Pollock et al., 2014) has prompted Canadian education faculties to reassess their approach to preparing aspiring leaders. The research-informed findings from this longitudinal study could add to the discussion for Canadian university-based school leadership preparation programs to consider adding a modified internship to their programs.

Background

Based on Niagara University being a bi-national university responsible for meeting Canadian and United States accreditation standards, an administrative internship is a mandatory part of the university-based educational leadership program. Orr (2011) explained, "Regardless of the objectives or goals of school leader accreditation or certification processes, the higher the quality of programs and internship experiences, the more positive the effects on candidate learning and subsequent use of effective leadership practices" (p. 48); suggesting university-based leadership preparation programs can better prepare future leaders by designing and offering an internship component in leadership programs facilitating practical, hands-on experience and theoretical knowledge gained in the classroom. Therefore, adopting a modified administration internship format in our program was necessary to fulfill accreditation requirements while accommodating our mostly full-time working students. The modified approach allowed students to continue their regular work schedules while attempting to achieve the objectives of a traditional internship. The course included two types of activities and tasks defined as administrative and leadership. The purpose of the modified internship was to achieve the same objectives as a well-established, research-based traditional administrative internship by emulating the day-to-day experiences of a practicing school leader, applying leadership knowledge and skills, and integrating theory into practice under the guidance of a self-selected mentor. The internship activities were completed concurrently with the student's daily job responsibilities and extended beyond their workday hours, the same as any course requirement.

Niagara University Modified Administrative Internship Course

When I began teaching this course six years ago at Niagara University, I was curious and motivated to determine the effectiveness and outcomes of a modified internship course. Therefore, I began this longitudinal research study to confirm the consistency and validity of the findings. Overall, the structure of the modified internship course aimed to achieve the same (or similar) objectives as the traditional internship while including accommodations: i) enabling students to complete the field-based coursework during their regular work schedules and ii) ensuring the internship activities and tasks provided authenticity, practicality, and experiences that emulated those of a school leader.

The administrative internship course in the master's program at Niagara University is a mandatory three-credit course in a 36-credit program completion. The program is governed by accreditation from the State of New York and Ontario, Canada (Ontario) due to the university's bi-national status and the commitment to securing accreditation from both respective country's states/provinces. The Canadian program, MSED, aligns its leadership framework to the standards and competencies of the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) within the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA). These NELP building-level standards were specifically designed for institutions seeking accreditation from the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) accreditation. The eight standards are: Standard One: Mission, Vision, and Improvement; Standard Two: Ethics and Professional Norms; Standard Three: Equity, Inclusiveness, and Cultural Responsiveness; Standard Four: Learning and Instruction; Standard Five: Community and External Leadership; Standard Six: Operations and Management; Standard Seven: Building Professional Capacity and Standard Eight: The Internship. Therefore, standard eight is the foundation for the program's administrative internship course and practical experiences. More specifically, Standard Eight stipulates:

Candidates complete an internship under the supervision of knowledgeable, expert practitioners that engages candidates in multiple and diverse school settings and provides can-

didates with coherent, authentic and sustained opportunities to synthesize and apply the knowledge and skills identified in NELP Standards 1-7 in ways that approximate the full range of responsibilities required of building level leaders and enable them to promote the current and future success and well-being of each student and adult in their school. (National Policy Board for Educational Administration [NPBEA], 2018, p. 30)

Standard Eight has three components: 8.1, 8.2 and 8.3, outlined below in Table 1.

Table 1
NELP Standard Eight

<i>Component 8.1.</i> Candidates are provided with a variety of coherent, authentic field and clinical internship experiences within multiple school environments that afford opportunities to interact with stakeholders, synthesize and apply the content knowledge, and develop and refine the professional skills articulated in each of the components included in NELP building-level program standards 1–7.
<i>Component 8.2.</i> Candidates are provided at least six months of concentrated (10–15 hours per week) internship or clinical experiences, including authentic leadership activities within a school setting.
<i>Component 8.3.</i> Candidates are provided a mentor who has demonstrated effectiveness as an educational leader within a building setting; is present for a significant portion of the internship; is selected collaboratively by the intern, a representative of the school or district, and program faculty; and has received training from the supervising institution (NPBEA, 2018, p. 30)

Standard Eight and its three components were the foundation for the structure and content of the modified administrative internship course in the MSED program at Niagara University. The course was designed to foster a greater degree of self-directed learning, offering flexibility for students to gain field-based experiences and complete the required hours within the course’s 15-week time frame. Nonetheless, completing at least eight program courses is a prerequisite for enrollment in the Administrative Internship course. Additionally, candidates must complete 300 hours and nine specific internship activities with a self-selected mentor over the 15-week semester.

The Modified Internship Field-Based Activities

The students must complete 13 tasks in the modified internship and compile them for submission in their culminating electronic portfolio. These tasks included two types of activities: administrative/management and leadership tasks, all with the level of paperwork documentation component. The activities included:

1. A weekly log of hours and activities.
2. Four sets of meeting notes from sessions with the course instructor.
3. Seven reflection notes for the seven required activities and interviews.
4. A major internship project for the 15-week course where they organize and lead a school-wide project.
5. Plan and deliver a research-based professional presentation to colleagues with a focus on either technology, diversity, literacy, or numeracy (or a pre-approved subject of the candidate’s choice)
6. Attend a school council meeting.
7. Attend a school board meeting.
8. Interview a school principal other than their mentor based on the leadership standards and a follow-up discussion with their mentor
9. Interview their mentor on beginning school leadership perpetration.
10. Conduct a gallery walk of their school building or school district.
11. Completion of a poverty awareness project where candidates explore socio-economic data of their board and school community.
12. Completion of a BIPOC assignment (added in 2021) that details an action plan for future awareness.
13. At the end of the internship, the mentors must complete an evaluation of the students and

their experience based on the NELP standards.

Throughout the semester (15 weeks), students were required to compile documents for their electronic portfolio concurrently. In addition, they were required to meet with the course instructor every three weeks to review assignments, discuss deadlines, and ensure satisfactory progress. These mandatory meetings were meant to provide accountability and ensure students stayed on track with the course load of the internship. The satisfactory completion of the electronic portfolio, the logged 300-hours, and the mentor evaluation determined the final grade for the course, which was either satisfactory or unsatisfactory.

Methodology

This longitudinal qualitative study spanning five years (from 2019 to 2023) and involving five cohorts of students aimed to determine if a modified administrative internship consisting of an independent, mentor-assisted, field-based experiential course could achieve the same (or similar) objectives to those identified in a traditional internship for preparing future leaders better for school leadership roles. The study focused on evaluating three specific measurements of the effectiveness of a modified internship course in achieving objectives similar to those of a traditional internship. These included to: (a) evaluate if the internship opportunities allowed students to experience the authenticity of the roles and responsibilities of a school-building or district leader, (b) determine its effectiveness in better preparing students for the role of school leader, and (c) evaluate if the internship promoted theory to practice. These three measurable objectives formed the study's analytic framework, guiding its organization and interpretation of data.

Participants

All students registered for the internship course during each spring semester from 2019 to 2023 were invited to complete the survey near the end of the course. Sixty students ($n = 60$) completed the survey over the five spring semesters, and approximately twelve students were registered for the course each semester. Student participation was voluntary and devoid of any incentives or impact on student grades; however, ethical clearance was approved by the author's university Institutional Review Board because the study involved human participants. The survey was administered to the participants online via Google Forms at the culmination of the course, ensuring the anonymity of both identities and their responses.

Data Collection

Data for the administrative internship course was collected over five semesters, spanning five years (2019-2023). The questionnaire was administered and completed online using Google Forms at the end or shortly after completing the internship course. The survey consisted of 15 questions, and for this research, eight were selected, analyzed, and reported on in the findings as they pertain to the study's objectives. These questions included:

1. Could you share your general impressions about the internship?
2. Was the internship a performance test for the theories, knowledge, experiences, and skills you have learned throughout your leadership program thus far? Explain why or why not.
3. To what extent did the internship experience allow you to practice theoretical understandings of educational leadership?
4. Can you share specific instances when the theory was easily applied to practice, where the theoretical knowledge came to mind while the experience occurred?
5. To what extent did the internship allow for building practical knowledge in a 'real-world' everyday setting? What benefits come to mind because of the 'real world' experience?
6. Does the internship sufficiently focus on essential competencies for leading schools and their communities (e.g., curriculum, teaching and learning, and student achievement)?
7. Describe the most significant learning you experienced during your internship and how it will influence your capacity to lead others.
8. How do you feel the internship has prepared you to begin or advance to a higher leadership position than you currently hold?

Data Analysis

The survey results were analyzed using conventional and summative qualitative content analysis. Conventional analysis, as outlined by Downe-Wamboldt (1992), entailed deriving coding categories directly from the data to gain insights into the phenomenon under investigation. Summative analysis involves “counting keywords or content, followed by interpreting the underlying context” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1277). Using these two data analysis processes, which served as the study’s analytical framework and aligned with the study’s three primary research objectives, involved systematically categorizing and identifying recurring themes or patterns in the data. The analytical process encompassed several steps: 1) reading and identifying content and main themes based on the three research objectives; 2) assigning codes to repeated keywords and ideas and, from there, identifying sub-themes within each objective; 3) classification of responses according to the study’s main objectives; and 4) integration of themes derived from the data into the overall findings (Kumar, 2014). The data underwent multiple readings, and responses were summarized into a data display based on the above analysis (Glesne, 2016; Miles & Huberman, 2020) for each question to identify patterns and frequency of the content. Some data were coded based on themes and then tallied to determine frequency. Comments were generally categorized based on various aspects, such as their positivity, challenges expressed, relevance to mentors, the program itself, structural aspects, leadership responsibilities, and other relevant factors. The findings include an overview organized by the study’s measurable objectives.

Findings and Discussion

The overall research aim was to determine if a modified administrative internship course effectively achieved the same or similar objectives as a traditional internship. The findings are organized and presented below according to three specific measurable objectives: 1) to evaluate if the internship opportunities allowed students to experience the authenticity of the roles and responsibilities of a school-building or district leader; 2) To determine its effectiveness in better preparing students for the role of school leader; 3) To evaluate if the internship promoted theory to practice.

Modified Internship Objective #1: Did the Internship Provide an Authentic Experience for Experiencing the Roles and Responsibilities of a School-building or District Leader?

To determine this objective, I reviewed the data based on participant perspectives about ii) the authenticity of the modified internship and ii) the learning activities of the modified internship and their outcomes to provide an authentic experience. The two areas are presented below, concluding the authenticity of the modified internship outcomes.

The Authenticity of the Internship

Three survey questions (5, 6 & 7) specifically targeted the participants’ perspectives regarding the internship’s ability to offer an authentic experience of the roles of a school building or district leader. Across all five cohorts, participants all agreed that the internship provided an authentic experience. They drew on their participation in required activities to illustrate the genuineness of assuming the role of a school or district leader. Three themes emerged to confirm this authenticity: i) real-world benefits, ii) behind-the-scenes view, and iii) opportunities for networking with other leaders to build relationships.

Real-world benefits. Many participants (>20) commented on the benefit of the internship course providing structured opportunities to engage in authentic leadership experiences, often citing them as real-world benefits. For example, one participant commented, “The internship provided many real-world practical benefits. We saw the inner workings of some aspects of school and senior administration and gained some insight into the minds of our current administration team”. Another commented,

This [the internship] is the most real-world course in the entire program. Every class had “scenarios” that we would work through, but the internship made us look for real change and make that change happen. It made a hypothetical a reality and was an amazing experience. My favourite from the entire program.

Many others, like the following comment, stated their new awareness of the complexity of the role. One participant indicated, “Before this internship, I was unaware of all the various responsibilities of the administration team. Attending school and board council meetings allowed me to connect with the community and those working at the board level.”

Some comments also included negative connotations of the role regarding the challenges associated with the role, such as feeling overwhelmed, challenged, or struggling to stay on task. Finding methods to manage their time and keeping organized and up to date with required paperwork was commendable.

Behind-the-scenes view. Other benefits identified included comments about gaining insight into the behind-the-scenes of the role, understanding the day-to-day of a school leader, and seeing the role through a new and different lens beyond their teacher’s role. One participant described the internship as “humanized the role,” while another stated, “It helped them build confidence by knowing more about the role.” This participant explained,

I now have a deeper understanding of accountability as a leader, having launched a school-wide read-a-thon that was flawed to some degree but persisted through continued differentiation and collaboration. I now know how to collaborate diplomatically and vulnerably without betraying my boundaries. I now understand my capacity to be creative, and it does not mean I have to lead every facet of a project. True leadership and creativity lie in one’s ability to surrender and allow others to lead. These are just some real-world experiences that this course single-handedly imparted to me, and it has been the most transformative of all the courses in this master’s program. Overall, the internship largely reaffirmed many things for me, and I imagine that if you did not have any leadership experience, this internship could be very eye-opening.

Networking and building relationships. Many participants expressed that the internship helped strengthen relationships with their current school leader (or mentor) through more frequent interaction with them. One participant described it by stating,

It [the internship] allowed me to have conversations with my mentor, which were enlightening and eye-opening. My mentor’s role in my internship was crucial, as her openness allowed me to learn all about an administrator’s daily roles and responsibilities, which benefitted my application of these skills to a future educational leadership position.

Also, because some of the internship activities involved interacting with leaders from other schools and districts, some participants (<10) noted the opportunity to meet and initiate networking with other leaders outside their school context. For example, one participant stated,

I met the board equity officer, and my mentor introduced me to another school’s principal so I could complete my interview activity. This was the beginning of my building relationships with other leaders in my district, and I think this is a necessary part of a school leader’s role.

Based on the participants’ comments and the consistent frequency with which they described the internship as authentic for experiencing a school leader, I confirmed that the modified internship provided an authentic experience of the role and occasionally surpassed expectations. Furthermore, their comments could also link to sentiments of being better prepared for school leadership, attributed to their increased awareness of school leader roles and responsibilities.

The Learning Activities of the Modified Internship and Their Outcomes

As part of the modified internship, participants completed specific activities that emulated the roles and responsibilities of school leaders for achieving an authentic leadership field-based experience. The activities primarily reflected two aspects: administrative tasks (such as reflections, check-in meetings, and organizing their e-portfolio) and leadership tasks (including the school-wide led project, professional presentation, and interviews). Participants were asked to comment on what they learned from these

required internship activities. Based on their comments, it was determined that both sets of tasks effectively provided an authentic experience similar to a leadership role. Below are the findings based on the two tasks: administrative and leadership.

Administrative Tasks

There were mixed feelings about the required paperwork and written tasks; however, approximately 75% (n = 45) agreed that they were advantageous for fostering reflection and clarifying their thoughts. Some of the more negative comments were about the indirect learning outcomes related to the realities of the role concerning time management.

Reflection Task. The majority of participants (> 75%) agreed that the reflection tasks were valuable and helped them stay on task. Comments generally were aligned with this participant, who stated,

Things like the reflections allowed me to take a step back and consider what I had learned and how it applied to my studies in educational leadership. It forced me to think more critically about my work rather than just going through the motions.

Some participants found the reflection tasks time-consuming, tedious, and repetitive. One participant stated, "The written follow-up tasks were excessive - I understand their role as a reflective opportunity; however, it took away from the practical experiences." Another noted, "At times, it could be overwhelming and daunting, but it is all beneficial and a necessary piece of the internship." The mixed reactions to reflective writing were expected, depending on a person's preference to reflect on their learning. While some find reflective writing effective, others prefer to do it mentally. Ironically, the participants' comments also mirrored the sentiments of many practicing school leaders about the excessive and burdensome administrative-type paperwork in their roles, detracting from their ability to lead.

Check-in meetings. Participants virtually attended required check-in meetings in the third, sixth, and ninth weeks. The third and ninth weeks involved meetings with the course instructor, while the sixth week included the mentor. Most participants found these meetings beneficial, as they reassured them that their internship was progressing well and helped them stay on track. For example, one participant described, "It kept the pace going and ensured accountability to keep on top." Another stated,

The 3-, 6-, and 9-week check-in meetings and reflections were helpful and effective because they kept me confident that I was on the right track instead of having everything submitted at the end (not knowing if it was done correctly).

Other participants added that the course instructor's (not their mentor's) availability between meetings was imperative for supporting them.

Others commented on the issue of time, and the common sentiment was that there was never enough of it. One participant commented, "I felt that there was a lot! [paperwork]. On a positive note, I learned to prioritize and persevere better". Some (<10) suggested addressing the time issue by reducing the number of tasks and concentrating more on a select few rather than overwhelming participants with many tasks.

Completing the e-portfolio. As part of the modified internship, participants had to complete an e-portfolio. I created templates for all the portfolio tasks to facilitate time efficiency and streamline the process. Because of these provisions, many participants commented that completing the e-portfolio was more organized and user-friendly, facilitating the collection and presentation of their learning and internship activities. While some participants (n = 10) acknowledged that the internship portfolio required substantial thoughtful analysis and reflection, they agreed it was beneficial. As this participant commented, "It is not a simple form to fill out. However, I am so happy I did it because I now have a written record of what I did and evidence of some of my theoretical approaches to school leadership."

Overall, the participants found the administrative tasks of the modified internship relevant for reflecting on their learning, and it helped them to stay on task. I concluded that their responses mirrored many of the same challenges experienced by practicing school principals related to these types of administrative tasks. This confirmation indicated that these tasks offered an authentic experience those of school leaders.

Leadership Tasks

The leadership tasks were considered the fundamental tasks of the modified internship, and participants were asked about these tasks as all-encompassing of the internship experience rather than individual tasks. Therefore, questions 10, 11, 12 and 13 targeted i) identifying positive aspects and challenges and ii) describing the most significant learning from the leadership tasks. These findings are presented below based on the target areas.

Positive Aspects and Challenges. The data was tallied and coded for the frequency of common responses to generate Figures 1 and 2 below. The most common responses about the leadership tasks were that they provided real-world, authentic experiences (< 30), followed by working with a mentor (another school principal) (< 15) and the opportunity to network with colleagues (<15). Unsurprisingly, time management was the most challenging (<30), followed by paperwork (< 10), difficulties with building relationships and working well with others (<10).

Figure 1

Positive Aspects of the Internship for Participants

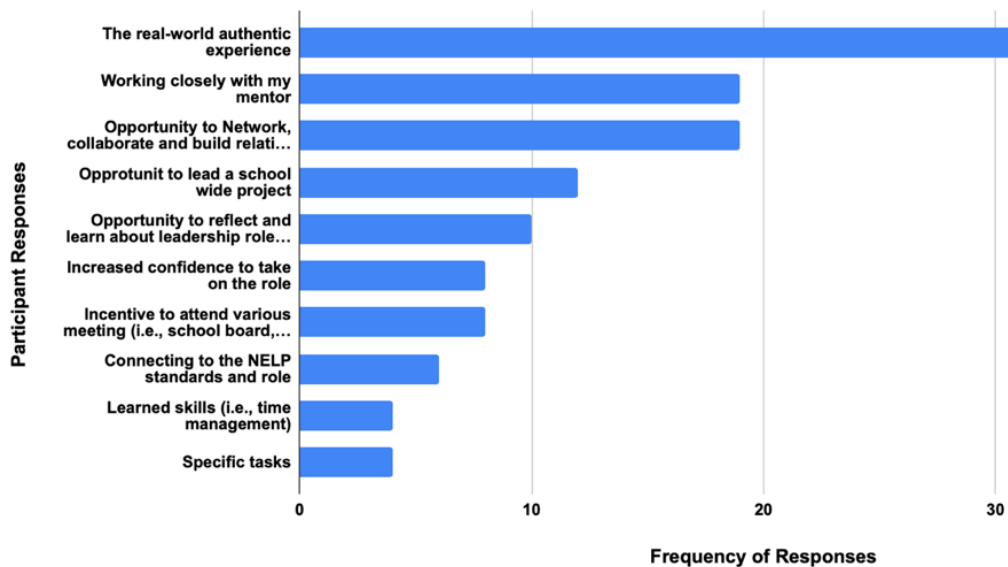
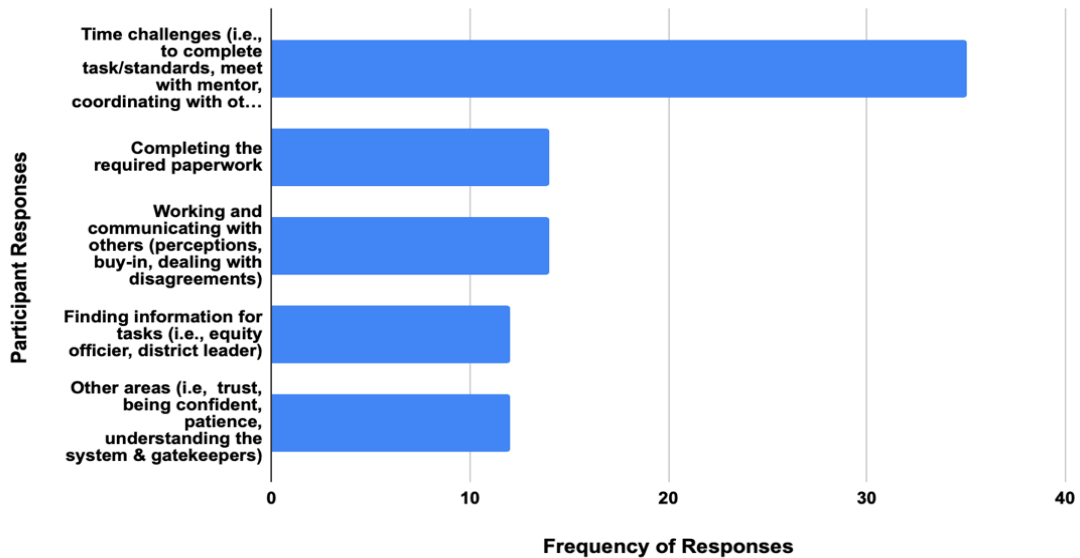


Figure 2
Challenging Aspects of the Internship for Participants



The cumulative data presented above confirmed that the first objective of the modified internship, providing an authentic experience of the school leader role, was positively achieved. Participants overwhelmingly confirmed that the alternative internship deepened their understanding of the various aspects of the school leader's roles and responsibilities in terms of the authenticity of the internship and the learning outcomes of specific activities.

Modified Internship Objective #2: To Determine the Effectiveness of the Modified Internship in Preparing Students for the Role of School Leader.

Participants were asked if they believed the modified internship supported them in their preparation and readiness for future leadership positions, and the data provided valuable insight into their confirmation of learning. The consensus among participants (<35) agreed that the internship was an excellent preparation, exposing them to many aspects of leading and leadership. Comments included descriptions such as a better understanding of the role, an opportunity to lead a school-wide project, and all the nuances related to such an activity. One participant stated, "I feel more prepared to advance to a leadership position one day because the internship has helped expose me to the many facets of school-building leaders' role." Others (<10) commented that the internship provided the opportunity for self-reflection on their (future) leadership style and approach, while some (<5) emphasized a desire for self-development for affecting their leadership. For example, one participant commented,

I need to personalize my leadership path and learn something from every leader. I also need to be more reflective and always go back to the *why* of what I am doing. I need to develop my personal leadership style.

Other comments related to building confidence for future leadership roles. For example, a participant stated, "The internship has greatly prepared me to begin a leadership position as I now have both the practical as well as the theoretical skills, and I have more confidence required to do an effective and efficient job." Although some participants felt it did not prepare them fully for the role, it identified areas requiring more learning. One participant described it as, "it was a steppingstone in the right direction because people need that exposure to know what they are getting themselves into when entering a leadership position."

Some participants felt their most comprehensive preparation for a future leadership role came from learning from their mentor. They expressed that they gained insight into building on their understanding

of the roles, responsibilities, realities, challenges, and tasks of being a school leader. One participant explained:

My connection with my mentor has led me to respect administrators' work immensely. Growing from this experience, I could see just a piece of how difficult their jobs are. I learned so much from her, which has built my capacity and understanding of what to expect in the role.

Shifting Perspectives

An area frequently discussed in school leadership readiness literature involves transitioning from a classroom-centric perspective to a broader, school-and-system-wide focus (Goodvin, 2005; Yeigh et al., 2019). Considering that most of the students (i.e., ninety-two percent ($n = 55$) in the modified leadership courses were teachers, their current gaze (Foucault, 2005) was from a classroom point of view. Therefore, it was necessary to evaluate whether the modified internship enabled a shift in their perspective. When participants were directly asked to comment on the broader education system and systemic change as school leaders, it became evident that many struggled with this shift in focus. Nonetheless, some participants (>10) acknowledged a broader perspective and commented on the correlation between the role of involving stakeholders and the politics of the role. For example, one participant stated, "It made me privy to the plight of an administrator and the politics in the role of an equity officer and director." Others highlighted the importance of engaging various stakeholders within the system, emphasizing the necessity of building relationships with them. For example, one participant noted, "For systemic change to unfold, it is critical that a goal is created and adopted by all stakeholders, staff, communities, families, and so on." A few participants (>5) used words such as "gaps in the system," with one participant commenting, "The experience opened my eyes to the bureaucracy and slow system-level changes that occur. The incremental change starts with activities such as this."

Overall, most participant responses centred on their understanding of the leader's role with limited reference to the broader system perspective, highlighting a need for broader points of view. The inability to shift to a broader viewpoint identified an area of concern in the modified internship. Conceptual shifts and increased systemic awareness are essential for aspiring school leaders, especially in today's context, with an increased focus on social justice and inclusive leadership, necessitating a systemic approach. The need for enhanced focus on developing the ability to shift perspectives was evident, indicating more comprehensive activities within the modified internship to increase their leadership readiness.

The cumulative data presented above mostly confirmed that the second objective of the modified internship—to determine its effectiveness in preparing students for the role of school leader—was achieved. Although participants demonstrated increased insight into the role, which could be argued to lead to feeling better prepared, the ability to shift perspective to a school-wide view was an area of concern.

Internship Objective #3: Ability to Connect Theory Learned in Program Courses to Practice

A recurring theme in school leadership preparation literature is the challenge of bridging the gap between theory and practice, primarily because of the limited opportunities for aspiring leaders (i.e., students) to connect what they learn in their courses throughout their preparatory program to practice. Therefore, a key goal in any internship is to provide opportunities to integrate theories learned in their program courses into a school context and practical spaces. This study specifically sought student comments on if and how they connected theories and ideas learned in their courses to their practice. To accurately measure this objective, it is important to restate that there was a program prerequisite that students must complete at least eight courses before enrolling in the internship.

Based on the participant responses collected over the five years, students confirmed that the alternative internship helped them connect theory (i.e., knowledge about leadership approaches and theories) to practice (application in school settings). Throughout the data, participants frequently used descriptive words such as "test-it-out," "exploratory," "apply," "came to fruition," "came to life," and "acted on my learning." Overall, all participants agreed that the internship provided a space to act upon knowledge

acquired from their coursework. Comments regarding theory to practice generally aligned with this sentiment: “While completing the internship reflections, this happened frequently: I would be completing a task, and then I would stop and realize that the task was theory in practice.” One participant described it as

The internship was a performance to test-out if I could apply all the necessary theories, knowledge, experience, and skills to real-life practice. I felt that by leaving the internship course to the end of my master’s degree, I could use all the knowledge and theories I learned in class from my professors.

Another participant explained,

The internship certainly helped me explore key theories, knowledge, experiences, and skills. Having had various leadership experiences and studied much about leadership, I found this course to be a well-structured approach to developing my knowledge base in educational leadership and exploring opportunities to gain greater experience in education leadership capacities.

Notably, some participants (< 10) highlighted that the mentor interviews were the activity that prompted them to reflect the most on bridging theory with practice.

Previous Coursework

Participants frequently referenced that previous leadership coursework is necessary to enhance internship outcomes. Many (<35) felt that the previous coursework was the foundation for the internship, allowing them to use their learned knowledge in practice as a culmination of the whole program. One participant explained,

You need to know all the theories behind being a successful school leader. Sometimes, we face politics that can get in between -however, we must apply the theories we learned. Theoretical understandings of educational leadership were certainly practiced during the internship. For instance, once I had developed a vision, I had to call a committee together, chair meetings, effectively communicate my vision, co-construct smart goals, motivate committee members and implement the changes we wanted to see. In addition, for the first time, I found myself developing timelines alongside other teachers and holding them accountable to those timelines. On a personal note, this was also the first time my colleagues started to recognize that administration was a path I was headed toward, and it was interesting to navigate their changes in perception and, often, treatment towards me. It was a true taste of what it might feel like to be a first-year administrator.

Another participant explained,

it [the internship] was a great platform for putting theory to practice. We [participant and mentor] discussed the importance of using research and data to help schools, but now we had an opportunity to find a unique method of improving our school and showcase the knowledge gained in the program. A lot of the work was great practice, but when put in a position to use this masterwork for my career, it was a great way to show that I have learned many things throughout the time.

One participant added that their previous leadership knowledge contributed to a successful internship. He explained,

I constantly reminded myself of the theoretical learnings throughout the program whenever I felt like my back was pushed on a wall. I would occasionally step back and allow myself to

reflect to help me critically understand some frustrating situations. And I think that's what got me through all the challenges.

Specific Connections of Theory to Practice

Some participants (n=13) made specific connections to coursework (e.g., school law course, introduction to educational leadership), while others identified specific connections to theories. The two most frequently cited were related to i) leadership approaches and ii) change theories.

Specific Course Work. Participants provided details about the specific connections to the coursework. For example, one participant stated,

I could pull from what I knew in my coursework to build my vision, which required buy-in from board-level employees, colleagues, and parents. I opted to 'recruit' staff to co-build my vision, taking their input and ideas into account. I could work with my mentor and maintain communication, involving her as the vision progressed. I believe that through this program, I have developed a better understanding of myself as a leader, of who I hope to be, and of how to achieve my goals in an effective and sustainable manner. I found myself accessing and utilizing knowledge from courses such as School Law, Introduction to Leadership, Curriculum Design, and all the other courses I have taken.

Specific Theories. Comments about change theories were the most frequently mentioned among participants. For example, numerous comments included descriptions of implementing change with all stakeholders, planning for new ideas, leading change, engaging in uncomfortable conversations, and building a school climate. Additional comments were related to building relationships and the necessity of addressing equity. Some participants (>10) mentioned a focus on data-driven decision-making, including community, policy implementation and practices, and types of leaders using various leadership approaches. One participant commented, "Parts of theories were always applied: When developing your 'change' plan, theories of change would be applied for a smoother transition."

Some participants made specific comments related to leadership approaches, such as,

I could stand back and listen, observe, and assess what was happening and where to proceed from there. I thought about the elements of the transformational leadership style and how I could change myself based on the needs of the people I was working with.

Another commented, "With this experience, I could see what it was like to be a servant leader—someone willing to make the necessary change for the people part of the system." Another recalled, "I recruited colleagues to work with me, and as I led the project, one of Northouse's terms (the textbook used in a course) came to mind—observe from the balcony as we collaboratively worked on these projects."

Collectively, the participants' detailed and specific comments provided compelling evidence of the modified internship's success in achieving the third objective: providing an opportunity for applying theory to practice.

Final Comments

Overall, most of the feedback regarding the internship was overwhelmingly positive. Most comments mirrored the following,

The administrative internship course was an enlightening and rewarding opportunity. It allowed me to fully immerse myself in an administrator's day-to-day duties and responsibilities and reflect on my professional practice as I work towards an educational leadership role. Given that my internship took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, I was forced to modify many of my internship activities - a reminder that educational leaders are always learning, growing, and adapting as we face new realities.

While some participants found the internship overwhelming, time-consuming, and occasionally challenging, they agreed that the benefits outweighed the negative. For example, one participant stated,

At the start of the course, I felt a bit overwhelmed by all the assignments. It seemed like a lot; however, when I started completing the work, it never felt like work. Instead, it was an experience that I was having, and it was so nice to have my mentor to bounce ideas off and provide me with the opportunity to work with her team.

Many comments (<45) referred to the internship as an excellent and positive opportunity. Others described the experience as authentic learning, practical, useful, valuable, beneficial, insightful, eye-opening, realistic, and hands-on. One participant stated,

The internship provided me with insight into being an effective leader. It gave me the opportunity to get my hands on and work with successful leaders. According to the triangle of learning, for somebody to be successful and able to retain knowledge and information, they must experience it through either teaching it themselves, internships, placements, co-op, etc.

Many participants commented that the internship allowed them to work with a leader, forge relationships, make connections, and collaborate with the whole staff. Comments such as the following confirmed that the internship is worthy of being in a leadership preparation program as they captured the positive learning from the internship experience,

I was nervous about working alongside an administrator when I started the internship. However, as time progressed, I personally found this to be an outstanding experience as I gained a wealth of knowledge on the day-to-day role of an administrator. Additionally, I came to understand how important this experience really was when I was involved in assisting the principal in making decisions and seeing positive results. The level of practicality that this internship brings is imperative for the success and growth of every candidate enrolled.

Another participant commented,

The entire EDU 694 internship course proved to be my professional career's most tempestuous learning process. The planning, research, and cultivation of a schoolwide project is an enriching process, but the execution and buy-in amongst staff was a journey in human behaviour that one could not anticipate. This course singlehandedly taught me the value of building relationships and establishing a rapport with all teachers. More specifically, it taught me how to make inclusion a tangible and daily practice within a school culture.

The findings over five years positively confirmed the purpose of this study: the capacity of this modified internship's structure and format to provide similar outcomes as documented in traditional administrative internships (Cordeiro & Sloan, 1996; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Hackman et al., 1999; Orr, 2011; Orr & Barber, 2006; Orr & Orphanos, 2011; Young & Crow, 2017). This study established, based on the evidence, that the three objectives were achieved: 1) the modified internship provided an authentic experience for aspiring school leaders; 2) it prepared aspiring leaders better for the role; and 3) it was an appropriate opportunity to implement theories learned about leadership from courses in the program into practice.

Although Thessin et al. (2020) indicated that the mentor greatly influences the internship, this study did not specifically focus on the mentor-mentored relationship; however, participants acknowledged the importance of the mentor's relationship to enhance their internship experience. Also, some participants commented on the challenging workload of the internship while navigating their full-time education jobs; however, they followed these comments with positive comments about the learning experience and especially valued the opportunity to interact with their school leader (i.e., mentor). A testament to the modified internship, some (<25) named the internship the most valuable part of their MSED program. I

add that from my experience with past student survey responses in traditional class-based courses, I have yet to receive such rich and profound learning comments from students like the alternative internship participants who directly stated that the internship course positively prepared them for the role of the school leader. Participant comments like those in this study are what leader preparation programs strive to achieve.

Overview

Previous research on school leadership preparation has identified the traditional administrative internship as one of the most effective ways to prepare individuals for administrative responsibilities. Researchers generally agree that the traditional internship experience provides an authentic experience, allowing students to put theory into practice and better prepare them for future leadership roles. This longitudinal five-year study confirmed that a modified internship can achieve the same or similar objectives to the traditional structure and context. This study adds value and research-based evidence, specifically to Canadian universities that offer course-based leadership preparation programs with limited field-based opportunities, suggesting that a modified internship could be included in their programs. The significance and value of a modified administrative internship cannot be overstated. When the right combination of program structure, activities, requirements, support, and an effective mentor-intern relationship, leadership preparation programs can use a modified internship approach to accommodate full-time working students and offer aspiring school leaders an experience that has been proven to prepare them for the realities of the school leadership.

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