

## **Integrated Professional Learning: Boundary-spanning graduate leadership education with principals and district leaders**

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### ***Abstract***

*District-level central office administrators (COA) and school principals influence the efficacy of reforms aimed at improving outcomes for marginalized students. This qualitative case study examines the experiences of COA and principals from one reform-oriented school district during their participation in a master's degree program in leadership offered by a business school. Thematic content analyses of course syllabi and semi-structured interviews of program participants revealed that the program content reflected the market-based contexts school leaders and mid-level COA faced by focusing on business leadership principles with little emphasis on instructional leadership. Integrating principals and mid-level COA into one cohort fostered a boundary-spanning community of practice that could facilitate district-wide reform efforts. This exploratory study questions the boundaries often present between the professional development of principals and COA and invites further research on the potential of cross-boundary professional development.*

**Keywords:** *K-12 leadership, school principals, district administrators*

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## **Integrated Professional Learning: Boundary-spanning graduate leadership education with principals and district leaders**

### **Introduction**

School reform efforts in the United States have ushered in new approaches to standards, curricula, school choice, as well as teacher preparation, hiring, evaluation, and compensation. The push for rigorous standards and higher student outcomes in US schools often focuses on individual schools and ignores the fact that school reform is a multi-level endeavor (Barrett-Tatum and Ashworth, 2021; Gallucci, 2008; and Mackey, 2021). Both district-level central office administrators (COA) and principals at individual schools influence the efficacy of reforms aimed at improving outcomes for low-income and marginalized students. In their review of the role of districts in education reform, Rorrer et al. (2008) assert that districts are vital institutional actors for systemic reforms. Schechter and Shaked (2017) contend that principals are mediating factors in school reform implementation. However, principals and COA often are trained separately and can remain disconnected in their roles.

Negotiated through district-wide initiatives and individual school cultures, school reform efforts in the US are routinely initiated at the national and state level via legislation and policies. National and state mandates create accountability for districts and high-level district-level personnel, such as superintendents and cabinet members, and communicate expectations to mid-level COA such as program managers, content area directors, and budget specialists (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Burch & Spillane, 2004). Directed by national and state initiatives, COA envision whole-system reforms and work to ensure high outcomes for all students across a district. A productive relationship between COA and principals is instrumental for lasting, widespread education reform (Liou et al., 2017). This relationship can facilitate or hinder the implementation of reform efforts aimed at equitable school outcomes (Finnigan & Daly, 2012). These two sets of actors, the relationship between them, and the development of their leadership skills are essential areas of focus in this study.

This study presents a new cross-boundary approach to leadership development that integrates both principals and mid-level COA and positively impacts the within-district relationship between the two sets of actors. This paper asserts that an integrated model of leadership development that facilitates equitable collaboration between principals and mid-level COA can be a powerful lever for building relationships that support effective urban school reform. After presenting the context of this study, we provide a brief overview of three areas of relevant literature – principal professional development, central office leadership, and principal-central office relations – to contextualize the examination of participants’ experiences in the master’s program.

### **Study Context**

This inductive qualitative case study examines the experiences of principals and mid-level COA participating in a graduate program in leadership development at a US business school and considers how those experiences influenced participants’ conceptions of school leadership.

Distinct from pre-service principal preparation programs for aspiring principals, the business school is part of a university that does not have a school of education. Program participants worked either as principals or mid-level COA in the same urban school district. The year-long graduate program offered an executive master's degree in leadership and clustered the courses around weekends and multi-day "intensives" during the summer, which accommodated the participants' full-time employment. For example, a course that typically would meet 2.5 hours once per week for a traditional fifteen-week semester might reconfigure meeting times to occur during two or three weekends per month (via a meeting on Friday afternoon coupled with all-day sessions on Saturday and Sunday). The program schedule allowed participants to continue working as principals and COA while completing the program. The course content for the program focused on topics common in leadership studies in business schools, such as examinations of organizational leadership theories, individual models of leadership, negotiation approaches, coaching, difficult conversations, diversity management, and team leadership. In sum, the program was unique in three important areas:

- The hosting university did not have a School of Education. The university's School of Business offered the graduate program.
- The program was not a preparation program for aspiring principals and did not result in principal licensure. The program functioned as a professional learning initiative targeting practicing principals. Graduates received an executive master's degree upon successful completion without a direct pathway to principal licensure.
- The program included both practicing principals and mid-level central office leaders as participants.

## **District overview<sup>1</sup>**

The district in which study participants work reflects many of the prevalent characteristics of contemporary urban school reform efforts in the United States. According to the state office of the superintendent of education, the district served by the graduate program enrolled over 90,000 public school students in the 2017-18 school year. In the 2018-2019 academic year about 52% of the public school students were enrolled in the city's central public school district while about 42% were enrolled in one of the almost 120 charter schools in the city. The diverse school landscape positions the central public school district and the charter schools as competitors for student enrolment. Furthermore, the majority of the city's public school student population is comprised of low-income students of color. According to the governing body for the city's charter schools, in the 2017-18 school year over 70% of students were economically disadvantaged, and over 80% of students were African American or Latinx. The central public school district has a governance structure of mayoral control. The mayor appoints the school district leader, and there have been six district leaders appointed over the past ten years. A National Research Council review of public education in the city determined that public school student achievement demonstrated consistent disparities marked by race and ethnicity, special education status, socioeconomic level, and English language proficiency status. In addition to the shift to mayoral control in 2007 and the

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<sup>1</sup> Citations for data used in the district overview are blinded to protect the district's anonymity.

proliferation of charter schools that brought school choice and competition to the city's education landscape, the same review determined that the central public school district underwent many of the contemporary efforts in US education reform. They closed under-enrolled schools, worked with alternative certification programs as part of a human capital strategy, and instituted a new teacher evaluation tool that incorporated student achievement on standardized tests as a substantial indicator of teacher effectiveness.

## Relevant Literature

### Principal professional development

Educational leaders must be attentive to the needs and viewpoints of fast-changing and dynamic societies, which are marked by conflict, global migration, cultural diversity, growing disparities, and most recently, the Covid-19 pandemic (Banwo et al., 2022; Ganon-Shilon et al., 2022). Additionally, the last two decades brought changes in educational policies, such as No Child Left Behind (2001) and Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), that hold schools accountable for the academic performance of students and demand evolutionary leadership practices. School principals must fulfill multiple roles, including that of instructional leader, and their professional development is imperative to ensure the effective implementation of non-negotiable directives outlined in policies (Westberry & Hornor, 2022). Previous research demonstrates the influence that principals can exert on student learning (Leithwood et al., 2004; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins 2020; Williams, 2022). As curators of school culture and instructional leaders, principals bridge district priorities, community interests, and school realities that facilitate or hinder reforms. In this way, principals serve as direct enactors of national and district school reform initiatives (Seashore & Robinson, 2012).

Beyond pre-service preparation and licensure for aspiring principals, current policy initiatives and research indicate the need for job-embedded professional development for principals. In a report commissioned by the Wallace Foundation, Manna (2015) identified six policy levers that states can engage to increase principal quality to improve school effectiveness. "Supporting principals' growth with professional development" is one of these policy levers (Manna, 2015, pg. 23). Westberry and Hornor (2022) also underscore the need to address principals' skills deficits in an environment that neglects principals in favor of teachers while acknowledging that principals may deny any skills deficits. Manna<sup>2</sup> (2015) argued that principal professional development has been minimized in deference to teacher development, ignoring research on the importance of principals as "invaluable multipliers of teaching and learning in the nation's schools" (p. 12). For example, in a survey of a representative sample of districts across the US, 66% of districts reported allocating federal Title II funding to teacher professional development, while only 31% of districts reported using that funding to support principal

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<sup>2</sup> Manna's (2015, 8) report also challenges the idea of broadening the definition of school leadership, asserting that it "has had the unintended consequence of obscuring the unity and specific roles that principals play." Manna (2015, 8) is most directly addressing the inclusion of teacher leadership as *school leadership* and "the trend toward harnessing the leadership capabilities of entire school staffs" as part of school leadership. This study builds on the shift that occurs when, as a part of a broader transformation, the work of central office actors is seen by others and themselves as impacting school effectiveness and directing school reform. In this sense, mid-level COA are seen and see themselves as school leaders.

professional development (US Department of Education, 2015). Rowland (2017) contends that overlooking principal professional development ignores the crucial role principals play in student success and principals' need for ongoing growth, development, and support beyond that gained through pre-service principal preparation programs.

Effective principal professional development has been linked to positive outcomes for students, teachers, and principals (Herman et al., 2017). Some forms of principal professional development have demonstrated positive outcomes for student achievement (Aguilar et al., 2011). Principals who receive professional development are less likely to leave their schools (Goldring & Taie, 2014), and lower principal attrition has been linked to higher student achievement in schools (Miller, 2013).

## **The role of mid-level COA**

Current research in the field of educational leadership is clear about the role of principals and central office administrators. Principals are charged with establishing and maintaining schools that prepare students for a world of work while curating a healthy sense of themselves. COA are often assigned the task of supervising principals and initiatives that span across the individual schools within a district (Aspen Institute, 2022; Honig & Rainey, 2019; Rogers, 2022). To ensure principals are enacting strategies that align with federal, state, and district policies regarding student performance and achievement, the focus of supervision for COA has shifted from operations, management, and compliance to effective instructional strategies to improve student performance (Honig & Rainey, 2019; Rogers, 2022; Stosich, 2020). Mid-level COA are charged with the district-wide decision-making, implementation, and oversight of reforms in human capital, evaluation, instruction, and assessment. Often with little training, COA define and lead reform efforts while translating and communicating instructional initiatives that bridge schools and community stakeholders to ensure equity in district improvements (Burch and Spillane, 2004; Honig, 2006). Findings from a study conducted by Honig & Rainey (2019) illuminate factors, such as assessing prior knowledge, being mentored by district leaders, and self-directed learning, needed for COA to be successful as they transition from theoretical supervision from afar to a more practical style of supervision. Blase (2009, p. 206) revealed the ways mid-level COA, historically viewed as “bureaucratic functionaries” and “fierce guardians of the status quo,” may thwart school reform initiatives if they “perceive their reform policies as threatening their positions in the organization and future well-being.” Burch and Spillane’s research (2004) demonstrated that mid-level COA ascribed to an authoritative orientation and did not show a strong interest in collaborative leadership. The authors maintain that “mid-level district personnel broker resources, knowledge, and ideas within and across the district” (p. 3). Brokers demonstrate an authoritative orientation toward school reform initiatives where mid-level COA “see themselves and others at the district level as experts and see principals, teachers, and other school-level personnel as targets and beneficiaries of their own and others’ expertise” (Burch & Spillane 2004, p. 4). The opposing orientation, which is holistically collaborative, allows brokers to see principals and other school-level personnel as substantial sources of expertise. Burch and Spillane (2004) assert that collaborative, coherent partnerships are possible as long as mid-level COA employ a collaborative orientation toward their way of work. Brokers viewing reform collaboratively impart a fluid

exchange of knowledge and expertise between the central office and schools (Burch & Spillane, 2004).

COA are responsible for systemic decision-making, implementation, and oversight while principals lead schools. The capacity of COA is directly related to the district-wide dissemination and sustainability of positive school-level change. Blase (2009, p. 198) contends that the “recognition of the crucial roles played by superintendents and mid-level district personnel as critical to successful program implementation has heightened attention to their roles.” Honig (2013, p. 2) laments that the traditional “...work practices and capacity of central office staff are ill-suited for supporting better student outcomes.”

The reorientation of the work of COA while restructuring culture and strategy within school districts is emerging as an education reform approach, especially in US urban areas. Honig et al. (2009) identify this strategy as central office transformation that “involves deep institutional shifts in the nature of COAs’ work and their relationships with schools” (p. 21). Honig (2013) concludes that the current ethos of US education reform focused on student performance requires district-level offices to move their focus from logistical and operational functions toward engagement with schools and the support of learning and teaching.

## **Principal-central office relationship**

Principals and COA influence the effectiveness of education reform efforts (Schechter & Shaked, 2017); their strengths, expertise, and working relationships are key considerations in the school reform movement. Both principals and COA develop and implement strategies to support student learning and facilitate intra- and interschool networking for knowledge sharing (Ganon-Shilon et al., 2022). In contrast with prior US education reform efforts that volleyed authority between the central office and local school sites in a zero-sum game, central office transformation views “both school and central office leaders as vital co-participants and partners in educational improvement” (Honig et al., 2009, 2p. 3). This partnership focuses on developing the capacity of principals and COA in ways oriented toward supporting teaching and learning in schools across a district. Honig et al. (2009) surmise that, although aimed at breaking down the barriers between principals and COA, the effectiveness of these central office transformation strategies varied widely often due to central office personnel’s lack of capacity for a collaborative leadership role.

A lack of relational trust and collaborative relationships between principals and COA often characterize schools in the most need of reform and support as a result of low student outcomes (Finnigan & Daly, 2012). In addition, low-performing schools often have the weakest relationships with COA, which hinders the flow of information and resources (Mania-Singer, 2017). Mid-level COA serving as brokers can further damage relations with the most vulnerable populations by viewing school relationships as low priority, communicating with schools via directives rather than engaging in meaningful dialogue, lacking knowledge of school-based issues, and being unable to support teaching and learning efforts due to inadequate or non-existent experience in these areas. Rogers (2022) cites three functions (liaison, evaluation, support) embedded in the role of COA as brokers and aids in reimagining the interactions between principals and COA. As liaisons, COA manage the exchange of knowledge and resources between schools and the central office. The evaluative component invites COA to monitor principals’ site-based practices and provide

needed feedback, while functioning as a supporter by actively coaching and mentoring principals. Shifts in the role of COA as brokers, such as those identified by Rogers (2022), substantiate the call made by Boudreaux (2017) for districts to implement internal reform changes to ensure long-term principal success. The growth of relational capital between educational leaders may be on such internal change and can be developed via cooperative professional development initiatives. According to Safir and Fullan (2017, p. 107), “risk-taking, productive conflict, hard dialogues, adult learning, and cooperation, underpinned by active listening, authentic concern, and curiosity” among educational leaders provide a pathway toward equitable school reform. These authors state that relationships between stakeholders are like “currency” in schools and liken relational capital to an investment account of trust and altruism.

## Method

This qualitative case study (Yin, 2009) sought to understand the experiences of five participants in a business school graduate-level leadership program and how those experiences impacted participants’ development as leaders in a US urban school district undergoing reform. The graduate education program enrolled both school principals and mid-level COA in one integrated cohort. The central research questions for this study are: (1) What are the experiences of principals and mid-level COA in a business school graduate leadership program? (2) How do principals’ and mid-level COA experiences in a business school graduate leadership program influence their conceptions of leadership in education? To ensure alignment with the definition of our chosen method regarding “in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information” as advanced by Creswell (2013, p. 97), three class sessions were observed to gain a general knowledge of the program, build an understanding of how the courses were run, and introduce the interviewer in advance of soliciting interviewees. In addition, course syllabi were collected and five program graduates participated in semi-structured interviews.

## Data collection

The cohort during the year of this study consisted of nineteen participants. Six were mid-level COA and thirteen were principals. All were employed by the same school district that served one US city. After establishing a general understanding of the program by observing three class sessions, formal data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews with principals and mid-level COA enrolled in the program and content analysis of course syllabi. To recruit study participants, announcements were made during a class session. In addition, both the program director and a district communications officer sent out a recruitment email explaining the study. The fall after completing the program, five program graduates agreed to participate in semi-structured interviews (two principals and three mid-level COA). COA participants held administrative positions as directors or deputy directors overseeing districtwide programs such as those governing hiring, educator evaluation, student support initiatives, community partnerships, and out-of-school programs.

Each interview lasted 30-40 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed. The interviews yielded approximately 160 minutes of interview data. The interviews, conducted by phone or in person at the participant’s office, focused on areas aligned with the research questions

examining the participants' experience in the graduate education program and their conceptions of school leadership. Listed below are examples of interview questions:

- Tell me about your experience in the program.
- How has your practice as a leader changed because you participated in the program?
- What suggestions do you have to improve the program?
- What were some limitations of the program?
- How do you define an effective school leader?
- Did your experience in the program influence how you define a “school leader”? If so, how?

*Table 1. Participants*

Participant	Years working in the District	District Role
Maggie	12 years	Central Office Administrator
Samantha	5 years	Central Office Administrator
Yosef	15 years	Central Office Administrators
Brenda	22 years	Principal
Mara	11 years	Principal

Syllabi for each course offered during the study year were also analyzed (a total of fifteen courses). The courses varied in length from short module courses that occurred across two or three sessions of approximately four hours each to “intensives” that met for more than twenty hours over the course of a weekend.

## **Data analysis**

The qualitative case study utilized thematic coding via multiple coding passes for both the interview transcriptions and course syllabi. Open coding and axial coding were conducted with the interview transcripts to identify themes within and across the interviews (Saldaña, 2016). Memos were written after each interview to capture initial thoughts, questions, and reactions (Maxwell, 2013; Saldaña 2016). Course syllabi typically contained sections for course descriptions, objectives, required materials, and assignment instructions/expectations.

Via the multiple coding passes, themes were identified in the course syllabi related to the course content, readings, and assignments. For example, multiple course syllabi describe how the content and/or the assignments were intended to apply to participants' actual day-to-day work at school and district offices implying a contrast to a more theoretical examination of course content distal from participants' daily professional lives. For example, in two course syllabi the assignments were described as “application papers” and participants were directed to demonstrate their ability to apply what they learned in class to a “situation you are currently facing.” Similarly,



another syllabus instructed the participants to conduct their application paper with a focus on “a challenge you are facing, or a situation that you see as a real opportunity for you and [the school district].” The analysis also included the course description and objectives. One syllabus stated the ability to “apply leadership theories related to diversity to school context” as a learning objective. These data were coded as “application.” Real-life applicability was a theme that emerged from this code. In another example, the content of the syllabi was analyzed to identify the extent to which a business context or education context was used as framing. For one course assignment, participants analyzed a case by responding to questions such as, “What actions should the company take now, and why?” Referencing the use of “company”, this data was coded business context. The theme of corporate management emerged from these data.

A similar approach using multiple coding passes also revealed corresponding themes in the interviews. For example, multiple participants spoke of how the course assignments applied to their daily work responsibilities. Similar to data from the course syllabi, these data were coded “application.” On the other hand, one participant described how she appreciated that the included principals and COA, stating: “one of the things that I was really pleased that they did, was shift the balance of- of you know, principal, as school leader, and central office as school leader.” These data were coded “cohort demographics.” Ultimately, the central themes that emerged from the data: real-life applicability, corporate-style management and leadership, and learning within an integrated cohort.

## Findings

Through the examination of a business school graduate leadership program, this study sought to understand the experiences of principals and mid-level COA in the program as well as the conceptions of leadership reflected in the program and by program participants. A thematic analysis of program syllabi and of data from interviewing program participants was conducted to address the research questions: (1) What are the experiences of principals and mid-level COA in a business school graduate leadership program? (2) How do principals’ and mid-level COA experiences in a business school graduate leadership program influence their conceptions of leadership in education?

### Participants’ program experiences

Overall, participants valued the applicability of course assignments and the opportunity to learn within a cohort made up of colleagues from various positions in the district. The real-life applicability of course assignments and the benefits of engaging with diverse colleagues were repeatedly highlighted in participants’ comments about the program and in the content of the course syllabi.

#### *Real-life application*

Participants reported that the program assignments readily applied to their daily work regardless of their position at the school or district levels. Participants valued the practicality and relevance of the course content and assignments, explaining that they were able to apply what they were learning in the courses directly to the demands of their roles in the district and then return to their peers in the cohort and professors for critical feedback.

Course assignments asked the participants to write “application papers” through which they demonstrated comprehension of course content and addressed exigent work-based dilemmas. Here, Mara, a school principal, explains how the authentic course assignments influenced her work at the school

I thought that the tasks that we had to do for the most part were really effective...**I really had the opportunity to write papers about real problems of practice, and actually do things differently because of them.** (Mara, school principal)

When describing how the program instructors demonstrated relevant content, Melissa echoed the value of the real-life applicability the program content offered:

...we [would] spend like thirty, forty-five minutes, like, kinda applying that [what was just taught] in real-life settings or situations or scenarios or with each other or learning or pushing or negotiating. (Melissa, mid-level COA)

Detailing the value of the relevant coursework, Yosef, a mid-level COA who had been in the district for over a decade, further explained,

There were a lot of opportunities to be self-reflective...**all the papers we wrote were real. So, it would relate to the stuff that I was actually doing at the time.** So, that was really helpful. I probably would not have had that amount of time to really think about [my work tasks]. I probably would have just went ahead and done it, but I was able to put them in the context of whatever the subject [of the course] was at that time.

## Management and leadership content

Analysis of course syllabi and participants’ interview data illustrated the program’s focus on principles, theories, and practices related to the challenges that accompany neoliberal school reform efforts characterized by a rapid pace of change, competition, and management (Brathwaite, 2017; Lipman, 2011). Given this context, participants appreciated the program’s content, particularly learning how to effectively have difficult conversations, identify and analyze pressing challenges within the accountability-focused environment, and build effective teams—all skills they felt were immediately applicable and essential for effectively managing the district’s intense, ongoing reform efforts. Data analysis revealed an emphasis on business-oriented and corporate leadership principles with a limited explicit focus on schools as participants’ work contexts.

### *Corporate-style management content*

The courses addressed leadership and management issues that are common in business schools and also germane to the diverse, dynamic environments emerging in urban schools, including:

- Multiple models of leadership;
- Organizational leadership with a focus on managing organizational change and creating organizational cultures;
- Human capital with a focus on managing diversity and leading teams; and

- Managing conflict while emphasizing negotiation and having “difficult conversations”.

Course syllabi varied in the extent to which they acknowledged the participants’ roles and employment contexts as being schools. For example, none of the course syllabi included “instructional leadership” as a topic. Some course syllabi didn’t reference education or schools. One course on innovation in leadership acknowledged the market-based context of education in the district and the roles that both principals and central office leaders play in the successful navigation of that context. “[This district] operates in a political environment and competitive marketplace ... [w]hether it is Central Office developing strategies ...or principals working with teachers...”

Some course syllabi did not contain any indication that the course was for principals or mid-level COA. Other courses offered a moderate recognition, with references to the “school” or “district,” which may have been substituted linguistically for a “corporation” or “business” with no change in the meaning of the sentence. For example, one course description used the word “principal” only once and could easily have been substituted with “manager” or “leader” without a significant change in meaning: “the attraction, deployment, and retention of valued employees are critical issues faced by principals, and these efforts create the pool of available human capital.” Integrating a corporate orientation into the leadership development content for the school leaders, another course description discussed the importance of “corporate cultures” explaining that

...the development of such cultures is a leadership challenge as well. While this challenge of diversity is particularly relevant for principals responsible for managing differences within multicultural schools and school districts, it may also represent an opportunity for enhancing student and school performance. Thus, the course is designed to strengthen your understanding of diversity and diversity management to lead more effectively in [the school district] and achieve sustainable long-term success.

Other course syllabi framed the work at both school and district levels as leadership work, acknowledging the context and mix of participants’ roles while implying that the course had been tailored to the cohort. For example, one course articulated a specific objective as “continue to strengthen professional ties within a cohort of educational leaders working for a common purpose, creating networked leaders” and offered the following course description:

Leadership communication within a school and within a school system is also about selling ideas...While we explore ideas on how school leaders can create a positive school culture (Deal and Peterson), we will focus on how to promote adaptive work (Heifetz and Linsky) in schools where the culture is not yet ideal – changing school cultures at the level of values, beliefs and assumptions – especially in light of resistance that, at first, seems irrational.

The majority of the course readings were focused on leadership in the business sectors with significantly fewer readings from the field of educational leadership and management. This is in stark contrast to the findings of Hess and Kelly (2005) in their analysis of course syllabi from 31 principal preparation programs. They observed that leading thinkers in business management were conspicuously absent from the reading lists in the course syllabi they analyzed and suggested:

“educational leaders will be far better equipped ... if they are familiar with a broad body of knowledge on learning, technology, management, and productivity” (Hess and Kelly 2005, 267).

## *Navigating difficulty*

Participants also appreciated learning how to have “difficult conversations” effectively, identify and analyze pressing challenges within the accountability-focused environment, plan strategically, and build effective teams—all skills they felt were essential for effectively managing the district’s intense, ongoing reform efforts. When reflecting on how her practice as a school leader changed as a result of participating in the program, Brenda, a school principal remarked,

working with the team, you know, looking at the dysfunctions of a team, and, and just making sure that I am managing appropriately ... And understanding more of the dynamics of everyone, everything, you know, how do I move this team...how to collaborate differently. I mean everything from difficult conversations to moving people as a whole.

Evidence of business management framing is seen here as Brenda references her role as a principal working with teachers as “managing appropriately” and groups of the school faculty as “this team.”

## *Intentional leadership development*

Mara, another school principal, intentionally chose to participate in the program after seeing colleagues complete it in the previous year. Mara wanted to develop strategic leadership skills to navigate the shifting landscape of education reform.

I tend to be a sorta “happy, in the present thinker”, not particularly a strategist and a future-thinker. In fact, in terms of my leadership skills, that is my significant weakness... And I had watched some colleagues go through the program in the first cohort year, I knew that they were doing a lot of the good sort of strategy, ‘looking ahead’ work....and that was something that I was trying to sorta put into my professional practice.

Yosef, a mid-level COA, also identified a strategic, intentional approach to leadership development as a strength of the program:

[This program] was an amazing opportunity to advance your leadership...I’d say this is really with [the current superintendent]... We’ve had many superintendents, and I must be very honest, there was not that type of intentional way. You just became a manager. There was no intentional way through the system until [this chancellor] started offering us opportunities.

## **Professional learning within an integrated cohort**

The program marketed itself as a graduate program in leadership for school leaders. Enrollment was open to both principals and mid-level COA implying a broad definition of the roles that counted as “school leaders.” The program was unique as a graduate degree education program that was not linked to principal licensure or pre-service preparation. As such, the program

fostered a unique community of practice where participants from multiple leadership positions in the district learned collaboratively.

### *Integrated leadership development*

Participants described the integrated cohort model as facilitating equitable, cross-boundary collaboration between principals and mid-level COA. The participants worked collaboratively within heterogeneous groups in class and on assignments that fostered collaboration and cooperation. The integrated cohort experience was new for many participants who were more accustomed to professional development opportunities segregated by positions, such as principals' academies exclusively for principals or department retreats for mid-level COA. Participants appreciated the time with colleagues from various parts of the district and the time to intentionally rethink their work.

I think the content and the professors were really good...**I think the time with my colleagues was incredibly valuable** and the time forcing me to step out of my day-to-day work and to sit back and to think about **what I wanted to do in the long term and how to do things differently with thought partners who had a different perspective** was really, really, really, really valuable. Yeah, three parts, the content and the instructors, who were great; the time with colleagues; and the forced reflection. (Samantha, mid-level COA)

The courses in this study emphasized reflection and self-knowledge, the real-time application of course content within the participants' work context, and collaboration among the participants. Given the integrated nature of the cohort, it is important to note that research indicates that diverse teams with shared, common goals are more productive and effective than homogenous teams (Page, 2007).

### *Reconceptualizing school leaders*

The cohort's integration helped participants see each other as "being on the same team," gave substance to the unifying vision of the district, and resulted in a broader definition of "school leader." Samantha from the central office explained, "...part of what the program has done in partnership with the district is to really expand the notion of who is a leader." Principals also articulated a more expansive, inclusive view of leadership and improved cross-boundary working relationships. For example, Mara attributes her improved relationship with COA in part to the broader definition of a school leader she developed as part of the program.

I absolutely have a broader definition of what school leadership is, and it includes all of those central [office] people... I liked the fact that my definition of school leadership was really challenged. I have a much healthier relationship with the downtown office, the central office, because of that. (Mara, School Principal)

The content of the courses also supported this goal. In some courses, participants constructed cases based on problems of practice and shared with the class an example of a core course concept that they were experiencing in their daily work. The constructed cases were often workshopped in heterogeneous small groups with cross-boundary peers positioned as partners and resources. For example, in a course focused on how to create a productive organizational culture,

participants developed a case brief of a leadership challenge they were experiencing at work, crafted questions for their colleagues, and workshopped the cases with the class functioning as a collective consultant. The instructions for this assignment read, in part, “with the help of your colleagues, you are hoping to get greater insight into the root causes of this—so that you can take it on more effectively.”

Furthermore, in one course on leading during times of change and transition, the syllabus explicitly stated as a goal the furtherance of strong “professional ties” among cohort members. Evaluation criteria for an assignment in another course included the explicit recognition of others in the class who helped the student achieve the course goals and construct a solution to a professional challenge. In this course, participants earned points on the assignment by addressing the question, “What key pieces of learning came from cohort-mates?”

Participants were encouraged to see themselves as a team pursuing a singular vision in another course that examined leadership models:

In your role in [this school district], you are part of a social movement. It is a movement with a mission: creating an educational system that focuses on the students —encouraging them, challenging them, and equipping them with the mindset and skillset to achieve excellence in school and in life. Each of you plays a critical role in this movement, whether it is in the school or at headquarters.

Such collaborative work enhanced participants’ experiences and provided opportunities for each to see cohort members as skilled resources regardless of their position in the district. At a minimum, each participant had the experience of seeing a problem of their practice from the perspective of someone with a different position in the district. Access to diverse expertise and perspectives was one way to discover more creative, innovative solutions. In addition, the purposefully constructed collaborative course assignments facilitated cross-boundary communication and collaboration.

Overall, the graduate program in leadership provided a robust framework for participants to work across the levels of their leadership positions (central office vs. school) to facilitate trust and a foundation for effective change. Distinct from PD exclusively for principals or pre-service principal preparation programs, the graduate program brought together COA and principals within one cohort. The program also featured corporate leadership principles and practices typical for business schools with relatively less emphasis on education-focus content (i.e., instructional leadership and content standards). The curriculum also included real-life assignments workshopped within the integrated cohort. These assignments helped participants bridge the gap between the business leadership theories and their work in the school district. These “application” assignments provided participants with experiences learning with and from their peers who held different leadership positions in the district. Participants encountered colleagues as sources of collaboration, expertise, and assistance in bridging the gap between principals and COAs in ways that could facilitate more effective district-wide operations (Burch & Spillane, 2004; Liou et al., 2017).

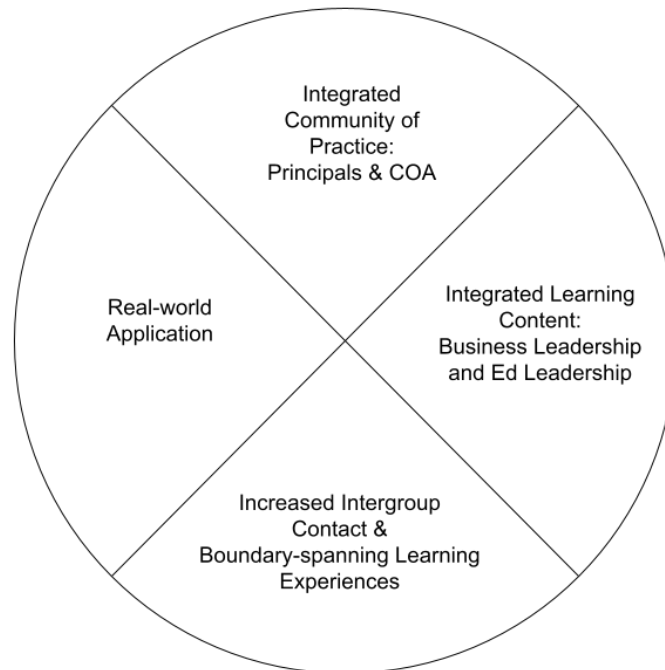


Figure 1.

## Discussion

This study examined the experiences of principals and mid-level COA in a business school graduate program. Two research questions guided this study: (1) What are the experiences of principals and mid-level COA in a business school graduate leadership program? (2) How do principals' and mid-level COA experiences in a business school graduate leadership program influence their conceptions of leadership in education? All participants were employed by the same reform-oriented urban school district. In recent years, the district closed under-enrolled schools, adopted college and career readiness standards, and implemented a teacher evaluation system that heavily weighted student test scores. These reforms reflected, and some would argue resulted in, a sense of rapid, challenging change and churn.

The program integrated the participants from two levels within the school district -- principals and mid-level COA. The integration of program participants resituated the work and responsibility for ensuring successful schools away from the central office versus school-based personnel binary toward boundary-spanning collaboration between school-based and central office-based leaders. This integration helped participants see each other as "being on the same team," gave substance to the unifying vision of the district and resulted in a broader definition of

“school leader.” Participants identified the resulting, more expansive view of school leadership and improved cross-boundary working relationships as benefits of the program.

The integration of practicing principals and mid-level COA marked a departure from typical US principal preparation programs and district-sponsored professional development that traditionally separated professional development offered to principals from that offered to COA (if offered to the latter group at all). The program’s goals, content, structure, and participants as well as the district’s support of the program fulfilled all of Allport’s (1954) conditions for intergroup relations and illustrated an integrated model for school leadership development that holds the potential to strengthen cross-group collaboration as a basis for effective district-wide reform (Daly et al., 2015).

The first research question for this study examined the experiences of principals and mid-level COA in a business school graduate leadership program. The program’s content and cohort demographics influenced the participants’ experiences.

Smith and Somer (2016) describe the rationale and process for curriculum development as well as the faculty recruitment for a combined interdisciplinary principal preparation program and MBA in educational leadership. The authors asserted that organizational leadership and management skills in conjunction with data analysis take precedence in the race to continuous school improvement and increase student achievement. In the program, Smith and Somer (2016) examine, the university’s School of Education and School of Business faculty created the MBA program which served as a principal preparation program where many of the students were practicing teachers aspiring to become principals. Smith and Somer (2016, p. 3) assert that the program could serve as a national model for integrating “best practices from education and business.” Although Smith and Somer (2016) provide a description of the program’s creation, little is known about the program participants’ experiences.

Unlike the pre-service program for aspiring principals described by Smith and Somer (2016), the focus of this study was an executive master’s degree in leadership offered solely within a business school of a university that does not have a school of education. The structure and orientation of the program focused on practicing principals building on the pre-service education-focused preparation they would already have received in licensure/preparation programs. Furthermore, the inclusion of mid-level COA resulted in an integrated cohort within the graduate program and expanded participants’ definition of “school leader.”

The program in this study reflects an emphasis on organizational leadership and management skills responding to the call to equip school leaders with the acumen of effective business leaders (Davis, 2019; Hess & Kelly, 2005). Course syllabi stress organizational change and leadership models, managing human capital, and managing difficult conversations. Topics related to pedagogy and instructional leadership were not evident in the course syllabi; whereas the business of managing and leading organizations was the program’s intended focus.

Efforts to infuse and redesign principal training with business school practices (Hess & Kelly, 2005) are reflected in a small number of principal preparation and leadership development programs situated in business schools. Advocates state that the current context of public education



requires entrepreneurial leadership skills similar to those needed in business. The rise in the charter school sector and movements to increase parental choice mean that principals sometimes have to market their schools and pursue students and families as ‘clients’ or ‘customers’ (Superville, 2015). The rapid change that occurs in urban schools in a quest for improved student performance requires principals to develop competencies in effectively managing organizational change. Business sector leaders and school leaders alike need to become adroit at managing and motivating teams, effectively communicating with diverse audiences, and leveraging resources toward clearly articulated visions and goals (Levin-Epstein, 2016). Critics claim that business school principal preparation may come at the expense of developing aspiring principals’ instructional leadership capacities (Mathews, 2008; Willen, 2010). The program in this study addressed this concern structurally by targeting practicing principals. By providing leadership development in a graduate program that was not focused on principal licensure and certification, the program proceeds with the assumption that principal-participants already possessed competencies in instructional leadership. Reflecting the call made by Hess (2003) to shift ideologies regarding leadership in principal preparation, the business school graduate program provided curricular content aligned to a conceptualization of leadership reflected in business schools’ MBA programs, including examining models of leadership, reading text written by corporate leaders, and learning to manage organizational change. This content was oriented toward both the district and schools as business organizations.

The second research question for this study focused on how participants’ program experiences influenced their conceptions of leadership in education. Facilitated by the integrated nature of the cohort, both the content and the program experiences influenced how the participants conceptualized school leadership. In addition, the program’s integration of principals and mid-level COA into one cohort oriented mid-level COA towards a more collaborative orientation in their work with principals by facilitating intergroup contact.

Allport (1954) hypothesized that prejudice and conflict between groups could be reduced by effective intergroup contact characterized by four components: the contact occurs within a context where the groups have equal status; the contact facilitates collaboration and cooperation between the groups; the groups have common goals; and a social or institutional authority supports the contact. Allport’s theory and conditions have been tested and applied to various groups. Most often applied to intergroup contact between different racial, ethnic, and religious groups, research has demonstrated the effectiveness of intergroup contact for reducing prejudice, tensions, and discrimination between distinct groups both domestically and abroad (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). In a subsequent meta-analysis, Pettigrew et al. (2011, p. 275) identified additional benefits of intergroup contact under Allport’s ideal conditions, including improved “intergroup trust” and “perceptions of outgroup variability.”

Research also demonstrates the applicability of Allport’s intergroup contact hypothesis theory for analyzing interactions between groups that are dissimilar in terms other than race, religion, or ethnicity. For example, Gierman-Riblon and Salloway (2013) examined intergroup contact in professional settings. The researchers hypothesized that reduced stereotyping and increased cooperation within a healthcare delivery team would occur when the learning context met the four conditions defined in Allport’s hypothesis. Illustrating the four conditions of Allport’s

intergroup contact hypothesis, Gierman-Riblon and Salloway's (2013) research indicated that the effectiveness of interprofessional healthcare delivery teams benefitted when the knowledge, opinions, and expertise of each member were considered equal to those of others; the shared goal of patient health and care oriented the team members' behaviors; all members cooperated in ways such that leadership structures of the group rotated based on the task not on the person or position; and when the organization's governance structure recognized and valued the group's work.

Reflecting Allport's (1954) intergroup contact hypothesis, the integrated graduate leadership program in this study facilitated intergroup contact between principals and mid-level COA. Allport (1954) hypothesized that structured, intentional, and boundary-spanning intergroup contact would result in improved cross-group relations. In addition, Clayton and Nganga (2022) found that principal professional learning that fostered the creation of networks extending beyond a principal's school as one facet in developing school leaders' capacity for social justice-oriented leadership. To establish equal status, participating in the graduate program positioned principals and mid-level COA as students. The course assignments and structure facilitated cross-group collaboration and helped participants see each other as "being on the same team" as all participants worked for the same school district. Finally, highlighting institutional support, the district promoted the program and the district's superintendent attended the end-of-program celebration. The intergroup contact fostered within the program contributed to positive relationships between the principals and mid-level COA in this study. The integration of principals and mid-level COA within the graduate school program facilitated the development of heterogeneous working relationships that spanned the school-central office divide.

The current context of high-stakes accountability and rapid-fire school reform has created a contentious atmosphere in some urban school districts. An integrated graduate program in leadership development offers effective intergroup contact among actors at various positions throughout the school district. Intergroup contact that fosters intra-group trust and the capacity for collaborative leadership while developing the leadership skills of all participants could reorient the central office/school working relationship and bolster education reform initiatives.

The resulting shift in orientation may facilitate stronger central office/school partnerships and positively impact student performance. Burch and Spillane (2004, p. 21) define this partnership as an "informal relationship between various stakeholders" that gathers expertise and establishes processes and practices for improving schools within a specific geographic area, similar to a "community of practice." The agenda within a community of practice is shared to accomplish a goal that a single individual or institution cannot. This community of practice creates an environment in which mid-level district personnel and school-based personnel have "substantive conversations about the design of accountability practices needed to implement the superintendent's reform agenda" (Burch & Spillane 2004, p. 23).

## Implications

The findings suggest the need to reimagine ideologies related to facilitating relationships among and developing the leadership skills of school leaders in various positions. Integrated professional learning challenges the traditional district-wide leadership structures in which the nonconvergent professional development paths of central office administrators and principals

diminish opportunities for both types of leaders to explore the similarities associated with their roles as leaders seeking common outcomes for schools and students. The importance of relationship building among district-level and site-based leaders is reinforced by the shifts in participants' perceptions about leadership in their respective roles as a result of participating in the boundary-spanning professional development program.

The findings also suggest that future and practicing leaders may benefit from co-learning communities of practices with embedded opportunities that couple theoretical knowledge with practical experiences in a context conducive to real-world application. The current neoliberal context of schools with competition, rapid reform cycles, outcomes-focused accountability structures, diverse stakeholders, and a focus on human capital may approximate the context of corporate structures. Without exposure to the corresponding tenets of leadership, the leadership development of novice and practicing district-level and site-based leaders may be thwarted. Our data suggest that a collaborative design and the integration of rigorous, relevant leadership and management curriculum content leveraged through real-life application could strengthen the relational bonds of leaders across a school district and equip them with the leadership skills necessary for effective school reform.

## Conclusion

The graduate program in leadership for principals and COA in an urban, reform-oriented school district examined in this study was distinct from traditional principal preparation programs in three ways. The program focused on graduate education concepts more typically found in business school leadership programs such as management, strategy, human capital, organizational change, and leadership models. The program content and structures also emphasized the use of case studies and assignments that were immediately applicable to participants' real-life job contexts. This curricular orientation addresses previous criticisms of traditional principal preparation programs (Hess, 2012; Levine, 2005) and responds to the changing landscape of schools and education reform as a result of emerging market-based forces of choice, competition, and accountability (Smith & Somers, 2016). In addition, the program did not focus on preparing aspiring principals for a future role. Instead, the program addressed practicing principals and thus developed and refined leadership competencies with context-embedded practice. Finally, the program integrated the participants from multiple levels within the school district responsible for effective school reform: principals and mid-level COA. In contrast to more traditional professional development offerings for each distinct group based on their position within the district, the integration of these program participants established a community of practice among the participants and opportunities for central office- and school-based leadership collaborations. The program's goals, content, structure, integrated student body, and boundary-spanning learning experiences resulted in participants expanding their definition of "school leader" and illustrated an integrated model for school leadership development that holds the potential to strengthen cross-group collaboration as a basis for district-wide effective reform (Daly et al., 2015).

This study demonstrates the potential of boundary-spanning leadership development for principals and mid-level COA who both are essential actors in school reform. However, multiple limitations contextualize this study. The findings of this study are based on a single case. Further

research is needed to examine the impact of extending an integrated approach for professional development and graduate education to additional cohorts and locations. In addition, the program examined in this study was situated in a business school. Research that examines leadership development as a form of professional development both within and outside graduate schools of education could yield additional insights. Finally, an important extension of this research would be a longitudinal study to explore the degree to which the improved intergroup relations between principals and mid-level COA staff persisted, resulted in any measurable differences in the outcomes of their daily work, and increased the effectiveness of the implementation of education reform efforts in ways that measurably impacted student achievement.

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