Cultivating Leadership Identity: Exploring the Motivations and Experiences of Aspiring School Leaders

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Abstract: We know that school principals are critical to school success and must have the appropriate knowledge, skills, and dispositions to lead effectively. However, research shows that identifying these potentially effective leaders is difficult. Furthermore, little is known about the motivations and experiences of aspiring school leaders. This study, conducted at a university in the Southeast United States, aims to understand better the lived experiences and motivations of aspiring public and private school leaders enrolled in graduate principal preparatory programs. Through phenomenological document data analysis of 38 written narratives from 19 participants, the authors revealed several common experiences contributing to participants' leadership identity development: early life leadership experiences, exposure to models of leadership, and leadership opportunities in their professional lives. Findings also support existing literature on the altruistic motivations of school leaders. Finally, the authors discuss implications centered primarily on growing the principal pipeline, suggesting a focus on youth/student leadership opportunities and teacher/staff leadership experiences.

Keywords: *Aspiring principals, leadership identity, leadership life experience, school leadership.*

Introduction

A principal's impact on student learning is second only to classroom instruction (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). Yet, many districts encounter difficulty in finding qualified principal candidates (Winter & Morgenthal, 2002), with the lack of qualified candidates even more pronounced at the middle and high school levels (Whitaker, 2001). Due to principals' positive influence on various school and student outcomes, recruiting, selecting, and retaining high-quality principals is critical. Unfortunately, this is becoming more difficult as fewer aspiring leaders are joining the profession (Haller & Hunt, 2016; Tran, 2017), and greater numbers of current principals are exiting (Snodgrass Rangel, 2018; Tran, 2017). It is understandable, then, that the increased pressures on school leaders and the unknowns they face brought about by the Coronavirus pandemic (Stone-Johnson & Weiner, 2020) could exacerbate the difficulties in recruiting and retaining principals. Therefore, as states and school districts in the United States and schools worldwide look for solutions to the principal shortage, it is important, in part, to better understand what propels aspiring principals to pursue school leadership roles.

There is not one common path educators take to become school principals. While most principals were teachers prior to becoming administrators (Gates et al., 2003), that might be the extent of shared pathways. The amount of previous classroom experience varies widely, as does the amount of prior administrative experience. Some principals spend years at one school before becoming its leader, while others assume the role in a school where they have little to no experience (Spillane & Lowenhaupt, 2019). Therefore, the current study goes beyond exploring the professional pathways to leadership by focusing on the nature and influence of aspiring principals' leadership, individual experiences, and motivations.

Specifically, this qualitative study seeks to better understand how aspiring principals developed an affinity for, expertise in, and a personal identity aligned with leadership, thus leading to pursuing a school leadership role. In doing so, this study asks the following research questions:

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(1) What personal and professional life experiences do participants view as having contributed significantly to their leadership identity?

(2) What are participants' motivating factors for pursuing school leadership positions?

(3) How do these experiences and motivators compare between independent school and public school aspiring leaders?

A Shrinking Pool

In the last few decades, many have raised concerns about the decreasing number of school administrators entering and remaining in the profession. Fewer aspiring principals are joining the profession (Haller & Hunt, 2016; Tran, 2017), and greater numbers of current principals are leaving (Snodgrass Rangel, 2018; Tran, 2017), resulting in "an unsustainable level" of principal turnover (Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, n.d., p. 1). High levels of principal turnover are associated with decreases in teacher retention and student achievement (Fuller et al., 2007).

Many educators are deterred from pursuing leadership positions due to the stress associated with the role, salaries perceived to be disproportionate to the required responsibilities, and the complex and time-consuming nature of the job (Easley & Elmeski, 2016; Hancock et al., 2016; Tyre, 2015). Markow et al. (2013) noted that "regardless of demographic characteristics such as school level, school location, the proportion of low-income or minority students, or the proportion of students performing at or above grade level in English language arts and math," almost 75% of principals reported their jobs as having become "too complex" (p. 23). That said, Hargreaves and Fink (2006) found even greater difficulty retaining principals in urban settings and challenging environments. Loeb et al. (2010) found that smaller numbers of racial/ethnic minority aspiring leaders enter and remain in the principalship.

Unfortunately, while we are still learning about the myriad impacts of the Coronavirus pandemic, Stone-Johnson and Weiner (2020) have noted that the pandemic has only increased the pressures on school leaders and the unknowns they face. These influences make job satisfaction (or the perception of future job satisfaction) a critical factor in principal recruitment and retention. A better understanding of principals' attitudes about the job may help mitigate turnover (Liu & Bellibas, 2018).

Who are the Aspiring Leaders?

While many deterrents and other factors contributing to poor retention have been well-documented, we know far less about what motivates aspiring leaders into the profession (Hancock et al., 2019). To fill this gap in the literature, Hancock et al.'s (2019) study mainly revealed that altruistic motivators, such as being innovative, assisting with curriculum development, and improving student learning, influenced those who chose to pursue the principalship. Additionally, some self-serving motivators also factored in. Salary increases, more attractive job statuses, and expanding career opportunities also contributed. Spillane and Lowenhaupt (2019) recognized the combination of altruistic and personal motivators, citing feelings of social and moral obligation, the need for personal fulfillment, and a desire for more challenging work. Specific to turnaround schools, aspiring leaders were driven by a desire to address inequity, catalyze educational change, and impact teaching and learning (Weiner & Holder, 2018).

In addition to reinforcing the altruistic motivations of aspiring leaders, Lee and Mao's (2023) systematic review of 64 empirical studies concerning principal recruitment and selection noted schools' and districts' preference for leaders holding advanced degrees and those with leadership experience. Moreover, Myung et al. (2011) found that teachers tapped by their principals for leadership had an increased interest in school leadership and a higher likelihood of becoming a principal.

Public vs. Private Schools: A Brief Overview

As nearly half of this study's participants worked in independent schools (often called private schools) at the time of this study, it was important for the researchers to explore the possibility of notable similarities and differences between the public and private school participants. As such, it is also important to briefly provide some relevant context regarding private schools.

While private schools preceded public schooling in the United States (Sughrue, 2018), in contemporary contexts, private schools make up about 25 percent of the nation's schools and enroll approximately 10 percent of the nation's pk-12 students (Council for American Private Education, n.d.). At a fundamental level, private schools differ from public in their sources of funding and structures of governance. Tuition, endowments, and donations primarily fund private schools, which are often independently governed by a board of trustees (Alt & Peter, 2002; Sughrue, 2018). Of course, distinguishing between public and private schools is much more nuanced. While there are many similarities and differences, it is important to note that, given the nature of the current study, literature about the recruitment and retention of private school leaders is almost nonexistent.

Summary

While a growing body of research is illuminating aspects of principal recruitment and retention (save for the independent school setting), expanding the knowledge base by exploring the backgrounds, motivations, and experiences of those pursuing school leadership roles may contribute to a deeper understanding of school leaders, thereby influencing efforts to better recruit and retain. Citing multiple studies, Cieminski (2018) listed a variety of possible solutions to address the principal supply shortage. Proposals have included adjusting leadership preparation programs and requirements, providing alternative licensure options, salary and pay increases and performance initiatives, professional development and coaching programs, and rethinking the nature and structure of the role itself. The current study may add to these solutions by focusing more on who may be interested or predisposed to school leadership.

Theoretical Foundations

This study uses authentic leadership (Shamir & Eilam, 2005) and Lord and Hall's (2005) theoretically-based leadership skill development framework. First, Shamir and Eilam (2005) suggest that authentic leadership is "based on the leader's self-concept: his or her self-knowledge, self-concept clarity, self-concordance, and person-role merger, and on the extent to which the leader's self-concept is expressed in his or her behavior" (p. 395). In other words, the understanding of and meaning that a leader attributes to their lived experiences is central to their development as a leader.

Similarly, Lord and Hall's (2005) framework suggests that leadership skills develop beginning with a set of "loosely-connected" skills early on. Over time, these skills "become increasingly proceduralized and contextualized" and ultimately result in "their application [becoming] more driven by the internally-held values and proclivities of the leader" (p. 611). Lord and Hall posit that acquiring skills depends upon processing skills and the ability to access problem-specific knowledge. Additionally, they suggest "general patterns of qualitative changes in process and knowledge associated with the development of expertise" and offer "a rationale for expecting the progression from novice to intermediate to expert level leadership performance to be tied to social identities" (p. 593). Finally, they state, "These systems develop along with emerging personal identities in which leadership roles become more central to an actor's sense of self. Thus, over time, leadership skills and knowledge become inextricably integrated with the development of one's self-concept as a leader" (p. 592).

This theoretical framework stresses leaders' identity formation, self-knowledge, and self-understanding as critical to their development as leaders. The current study capitalizes on these understandings by focusing on aspiring leaders' construction of meaning surrounding the critical experiences and influences along their individual leadership journeys.

Methodology

As this study is concerned with understanding life experiences and motivations for pursuing school leadership, a phenomenological approach was employed. Phenomenology is a qualitative research method used to explore people's sense-making in a social world. The approach is used to develop a deeper understanding of individual and shared human experience so researchers can build a knowledge base that promotes desirable change (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007).

Context of the Study and Participants

The study was conducted at a university in the Southeast United States. A total of 19 participants (n=19) enrolled in the study. These participants were enrolled in one of two cohorts: an independent school cohort (11 participants) and a public school cohort (8 participants). Both cohorts were enrolled in the same "Introduction to School Leadership" course during the first semester of their two-year graduate program for aspiring school leaders. The independent school participants worked in local independent schools at the time of the study, while the public school participants worked in local public schools.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

Students enrolled in the course were required to complete multiple assignments, two of which were used as data sources for this study. The first assignment of the semester, a life story narrative paper, asked students to explain why they chose to pursue school leadership and the life events they believe contributed to their leadership pursuits (see Appendix A for the complete assignment prompt). The final assignment for the course, a leadership platform paper, required students to synthesize ideas from the course along with self-reflection to describe their evolving conceptions of leadership and their leadership "style" (see Appendix A for the complete assignment prompt).

The study was conducted by the instructor of record for the school leadership course and a colleague. While the instructor explained the study to all students enrolled in the course, those who elected to participate communicated with the other investigator regarding the study until the completion of the course to ensure participant anonymity. Upon completion of the course, researchers compiled the assignments completed by study participants.

Data Analysis

Phenomenological document data analysis was used to understand participants' motivations and lived experiences throughout their lives and careers that may have contributed to their leadership aspirations. Thirty-eight papers (two papers from each of the 19 participants) were added to NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program for analysis. Following an inductive approach, six stages were utilized in thematic analysis: (1) holistic reading of the entire texts, (2) line-by-line readings with careful note-taking, (3) follow-up questions to clarify intentional meanings, (4) line-by-line reading with articulation of meaning, (5) line-by-line reading with analytic thoughts (6) generation of themes (Vagle, 2018). The NVivo software was used to ensure systematic and consistent data analysis across reviewers and to reach a consensus on themes. Themes are reported in the findings, along with commonalities and differences across the participants.

To further elaborate on the reliability of this type of qualitative data analysis, the researchers employed a number of criteria to evaluate the quality, or trustworthiness, of narrative studies. It is important to note that establishing reliability can be a difficult endeavor due to the focus on meaning-making, as opposed to seeking any kind of objective truth (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Loh, 2013). Still, as Loh (2013) suggests, criteria can be used to ensure reliability. Researchers used two distinct narratives from each participant to provide a degree of "text sampling" (Mishler, 1990) to verify internal consistency across each participant's narratives. Additionally, these well-crafted narratives provided meaningful, deep, and insightful access into participants' lives (Eisner, 1997), allowing researchers to better understand "the decisions made and emotions felt by the participants" (Loh, 2013, p. 10). This enhanced the study's verisimilitude, or plausibility and resonance with the reader (Loh, 2013). Lastly, researchers considered the study's utility, or potential relevance to scholars or practitioners as an important criterion to further enhance the study's quality and reliability (Loh, 2013).

Positionality

A researcher's positionality plays an important role in the methodology and trustworthiness of a study. Researcher 1 is a White male with prior experience as a teacher and administrator in US schools. Researcher 2 is a White woman with extensive practitioner background in English-only US schools, Spanish-only schools in Peru, and bilingual (English-Spanish) schools in the US. While currently a researcher, she has experience as a classroom teacher, bilingual interventionist, and school administrator. At the time of the study, both researchers were assistant professors at a large, urban public university, working with aspiring school leaders in a Master's in School Administration program.

Participants were enrolled in a section of Researcher 1's *Fundamentals of Educational Leadership* course, though Researcher 1 was not aware of which students elected to participate in the study until the following semester, after the conclusion of the course. Furthermore, the study had no influence on the two narrative prompts used. The prompts had been assignments in this course prior to the study's conception, and no modifications were made. Additionally, Researcher 2, who had no direct interaction with any participants other than through electronic (email) recruiting, conducted the initial rounds of coding and data analysis. Through this arrangement, researchers attempted to mitigate any biases.

Findings

Notwithstanding differences in personal and professional experiences (e.g., some independent school teachers did not attend teacher preparation programs or attain state licensure), participants communicated similar lived experiences, opportunities, and motivators across four major themes: youth leadership experiences/opportunities, professional leadership opportunities, leadership modeling, and motivating beliefs and events.

Youth Leadership Experiences/Opportunities

Most participants (16 of 19) described early-life leadership opportunities. While some participants spoke of taking on leadership opportunities at a very young age, most spoke of their leadership experiences in middle school through college as being formative. From actively participating in school clubs, sports, student council, church activities, or other community organizations, participants gravitated towards opportunities to be involved and lead in their schools and communities.

The most frequently occurring early-life leadership opportunities were within clubs/organizations (nine participants), though participants came into these leadership roles in various ways. While a few participants were "shocked" when they were nominated and won a leadership office in a club or student government organization, most participants recalled feeling drawn to leadership from some of their earliest memories. In reflections, participants shared sentiments such as, "I wasn't satisfied to sit back and participate in the activities," "I was the kid always selling lemonade in the neighborhood, organizing playdates and parties with my friends, putting together fundraisers for local organizations, and orchestrating school wide "Save the Animal" campaigns. I enjoyed taking action." Others stated, "It was the use of my innate leadership skills that guided me in my decision-making and using these skills to influence my peer group to follow my moral compass," and "I had to run for student council, though it meant giving a speech in front of my peers. And when I say "had

to," I mean that something deep inside called to me to do it." The early-life involvement and attraction to leadership positions are evident across most participants, regardless of their public or independent background.

Extracurricular camps provided leadership opportunities for five participants. Camps ranged from outdoor wilderness explorations to focused leadership development to debate camps. All participants who discussed camp opportunities viewed these as opportunities to see themselves as leaders. One participant shared, "This is the first place where my leadership potential was nurtured, even though I did not realize it at the time." Camps also provided opportunities for participants to observe leadership in action. As one participant explained, "My parents assigned me to trips strategically, pairing me with counselors that needed my resources. It was informal, but my support of these leaders was respected because I was invested in the camp experience. The trips were inspirational." Camps provided these participants with an array of leadership opportunities at an early age.

Regardless of the type of early-life leadership opportunity, participants found these experiences influential in their aspirations of serving in school leadership. One participant wrote, "As I reflect on my personal and professional leadership journey, it is clear that this experience 25 years ago began laying the foundation for the type of leader I am and continue to evolve into today." Another reflected, "I found the confidence and ability to lead in college when I became a Resident Assistant." These early-life leadership opportunities also built leadership confidence and capacity, with one stating, "It was amazing how I naturally started leading, and I gained confidence the more I was in the role." Another participant tied his experience directly to his enrollment in the class, "I finally realized that I only needed to change myself, empower myself, in order to affect change in my environment. Thus, it is this evolution of my own desires for leadership that I brought with me into this class."

Professional Leadership Opportunities

Later, in their professional lives, participants described the impact of numerous career-based opportunities to lead professional learning communities (PLCs), grade-level teams, departments, accreditation processes, sports teams, school improvement teams, and more. Often, participants had taken on many leadership opportunities in the workplace. For example, one participant outlined her numerous school leadership positions,

> I have been given numerous leadership roles such as Team Leader, department chair, Literacy Coach, testing support coordinator, Data Team advisor, B[eginning]T[eacher] mentor, Design Team member (similar to a School Improvement Team), and various smaller roles. A majority of those roles I currently have, which can be overwhelming, but the challenge is invigorating and rewarding.

Another participant highlighted the administrator's role in identifying her for leadership positions, saying,

> Administrators selected me to be the Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) coach for the school. This meant I was also a part of the district PBIS team. In addition, I was selected to join a delegation of our district PBIS team to attend the Train the Trainer conference in Portland, Oregon.

Yet another participant identified their pursuit of honing their instructional leadership capacity through the opportunity to serve as the Professional Learning Community's team lead. They stated, "This role allowed me to master my craft as a teacher but also gain experience in aligning my goals and passions with that of a team. This was my first chance to act on one of my core leadership beliefs." Regardless of self-selection or administrator nomination, leadership opportunities in the workplace were clearly impactful for these educators.

Thirteen participants framed these professional leadership opportunities as impacting their journey to becoming school leaders. For example, one participant discussed the impact of professional leadership roles on her self-awareness, stating, "For the first time, I saw myself as an accomplished leader and gained a clearer picture of my authentic self." Having a variety of opportunities to lead in their professions impacted participants' aspirations to serve as school leaders and, in fact, built up leadership skills needed to explore new paths in education. As one participant wrote, "Opportunities with increased levels of responsibilities and positions of leadership have molded my leadership skills over the years."

Leadership Modeling

Participants also spoke at length about observing various leaders throughout their lives and the positive and negative impact those leaders had on participants' evolving leadership identities. Participants specifically identified parents, peers, teachers, and principals as the most influential model leaders in their lives.

Thirteen participants wrote about the impact their parents had on their leadership aspirations. In childhood, parents' leadership served as direct examples of how participants would like to lead and what it meant to be a leader. One participant discussed observing his father in his role as vice president for student affairs at a university, stating,

> He made a commitment to knowing the people who made the mission of the university come to life. And, I believe, that's one of the keys to effective leadership. Be a genuine person and get to know the people in your organization. Perhaps he left me a legacy of sorts.

Another participant discussed the roles that each of his parents, in different ways, had on his values for leadership, noting,

> My mother was a committed volunteer, so passionate about raising awareness about domestic abuse that she started her own nonprofit to do so. From watching her, I learned how far passion and commitment can take you, the importance of standing up for what you believe is right, and that any single person is capable of making a positive change in the world. My father was a successful journalist turned communications director turned CEO of a symphony. From him I learned that being highly knowledgeable and a strong critical thinker will help you be successful in most any situation, and that there is considerable value in building relationships.

Another participant identified parents as a motivator for leadership, despite having differing views on leadership. This participant stated,

> My parents are the greatest motivators for me to pursue leadership. For the 24 years that I have had the pleasure of knowing them, my parents have been guiding lights as to what it means to lead. Now, I don't necessarily agree with all of their leadership styles, and in fact certainly disagree with a good amount of them, yet all the same, it is from my mother and my father that much of my desire to lead stems from."

Several participants' parents served in school leadership. Reflecting on her father, a head of school, one participant shared what she remembered most about her father in that role. She said,

> My dad calls people by name, looks them in the eye, gives them his time and attention, asks honest questions, and listens intently--not mostly because he's trying to be a good leader (though sometimes that's probably true), but because he lives in service of others, he highly values genuine relationship, and he's simply curious about other people.

While not educators, another participant's parents modeled leadership through voluntary school roles. This participant commented,

> They always demonstrated leadership, kindness, and humility. They were involved in our neighborhood, our schools, and our community. My mom served as the PTO President my entire elementary career, and most of my brothers as well. My dad volunteered his time and talents as the "team physician" at the local high school.

Finally, one participant discussed his vision for servant leadership and shared an anecdote about his father, who was a principal. He stated, "You might find a leader scrubbing a toilet or standing alone out front facing the crowd. I was remembering a time when I watched my dad clean vomit off the carpet at school."

A total of twelve participants referred to principals they had worked with throughout their leadership journeys. Positive and negative examples of school leadership impacted participants and were discussed equally. Some participants shared their negative experiences with principals that serve as counterexamples of how they would like to be in the role. One of these participants said,

> I experienced dictatorship-type leadership where most decisions were made from the top down, and input outside the command of leadership was limited… to enact lasting change and academic success within an organization, it takes more than a few people making top-down decisions.

Another discussed fear culture as a model style she would like to avoid, describing her relationship with a former principal. She stated, "I definitely wanted to please him but it wasn't out of respect, it was out of fear. I worked very hard for him but also worked very hard to change schools." One participant provided another non-example of strong leadership concerning a principal who could not improve school climate. This participant "work[ed] on a highly coercive team and alongside an administration that was unable to heal wounds or manage conflict between staff members." Negative examples served as a motivator for these participants just as much as positive role models did for these and other participants.

In discussing positive examples of principals modeling leadership behaviors, one participant envisioned herself as an instructional leader, in part due to the impact of her formal principal, who "constantly model[ed] the habits and mindsets she wanted to see from her team. Her commitment to excellence for herself extended beyond relationships and coaching; she saw herself as the ultimate instructional leader within the school." Additionally, principals who build relationships with stakeholders stood out as model leaders, with one participant sharing, "[my principal] is the most empathetic leader I have seen lead, and he cares deeply for the students and the faculty." Another participant discussed how a principal encouraged and facilitated implementing change, stating, "[the principal] helped my colleagues and me implement change. She built up our confidence as we worked through the implementation of our new curriculum." While a varied array of leadership styles resonated with participants, principals certainly played a crucial role in influencing participants' leadership journeys.

Motivating Beliefs and Events

Finally, participants described primarily altruistic motivators for pursuing leadership. Participants chiefly mentioned mentoring, guiding, and supporting others; school and curriculum improvement; and being an advocate and a voice for

the unheard. Eighteen of the 19 participants voiced altruistic motivators for seeking a school leadership position. One participant encapsulated this sentiment, stating, "I believe that I seek leadership for the betterment of people, and different from most I seek to inspire that betterment from within, not bring it as some outside remedy that will solve people's problems." Another participant wrote, "I'm thankful I've found a career that I can be excited to get out of bed for – most mornings anyway… I'm motivated to keep working to do better because my classroom is full of kids like me."

Some participants also specified being motivated to work for diversity, equity, and inclusion in schools, referencing the impact of previous experiences in youth or their professional lives. For example, two participants spoke directly to serving Latinx families and students in their state, commenting,

> One of my trigger events leading me to want to pursue leadership is the treatment of English language learners and also Latino families. In all the schools that I have worked in I have noticed that students who come from Latino backgrounds, regardless if they are English learners or not, have been subjected to unfair treatment because of teachers' and staff preconceived ideas.

This participant continued, stating,

> Diversity issues are why I am pursuing leadership. I think I am in a unique position and that I possess a distinctive skill set. I need to protect my students from the negative stereotypes they are faced with both in and out of school. Being in a role of authority will help me improve the quality of life and education for the students I serve.

Another participant shared a desire to address equity and inclusion for neurodiverse students, sharing,

> I want to raise awareness of neurodiversity because we are all affected by it. Yet merely raising awareness is inadequate…I want change. I want to change the world so there is tolerance of individuals whose brains are wired differently. I want to change the world so those individuals may speak openly of their differences without being judged. I want to change the world so those individuals are treated with kindness instead of fear.

> Another common altruistic motivator was seeking to change the educational system itself. Seeking to make change for underserved students in general, one participant stated, "I have lived a life of privilege and want to take the things that I have learned in order to change the narrative regarding students within this city, particularly those in communities that have been underserved." Another wrote, "I feel led to use my position and platform to speak for our marginalized communities." One participant reflected,

> Focusing on the change that I can help facilitate has become the center of my purpose. As I lead, I aspire to be a servant leader and a change agent. I am driven to be this kind of leader because of my desire to help create a better, fairer, kinder world.

Another participant reflected on the lives of their former high school classmates when focusing on systemic change, stating, "I can't go back and change the life path that my classmates took, but I can use my leadership skills and positional power to influence systematic change in our schools." These participants viewed themselves as change agents for education.

While altruism played a primary role in almost all participants' pursuits of the principalship, some also identified extrinsic motivations for aspiring to the principalship. "Informal power" and status were still partial motivators for two participants, with one writing, "These roles gave me a feeling of importance and status in the school. I enjoyed that status and the way people looked up to me. I wanted to be respected by students, teachers, and community members."

Discussion

This study aimed to illuminate how aspiring principals developed an affinity for, expertise in, and a personal identity aligned with leadership, thus leading to the pursuit of a school leadership role. It focused primarily on participants' perceptions of the life experiences that contributed to their leadership identity and pursuit of school leadership opportunities. Our analysis revealed four themes: youth leadership experiences and opportunities, professional leadership opportunities, leadership modeling, and motivating beliefs and events. Through these four themes, it was clear how much leadership opportunities and experiences contributed to participants' pursuits of school leadership roles and their leadership identities. Our findings support and provide additional insights and nuance to the existing literature on aspiring school leaders.

While the current study focused on the experiences and motivations of aspiring school leaders, it is important to note that the amount of literature on prior life experiences of school leaders is far less than that on school leaders' motivations. As such, our findings related to the experiences of aspiring school administrators are particularly noteworthy. These findings, illuminating the significance and impact of prior exposures to leadership experiences and leadership modeling, reveal a strong alignment with Shamir and Eilam's (2005) Authentic Leadership and Lord and Hall's (2005) framework for leadership skill development. These constructs stress the influence of prior life experiences on the formation of self-concept, self-knowledge, and leadership identity and skill development.

Concerning motivations, altruistic factors influenced most participants to pursue a school leadership position. Aligned with Swen's (2020) findings and supporting those of Hancock et al. (2019), participants were motivated by the opportunity to impact curriculum, instruction, and school climate and the duty to serve students and create more equitable educational opportunities for them. Despite being presented with challenges and obstacles, Hancock and Müller (2009) noted that many principals have a strong desire to make critical decisions and to act decisively. Our findings reveal that these desires are deeply embedded in aspiring school leaders and have often been since adolescence. However, while findings centering on motivating factors align with previous research highlighting altruistic inclinations, it is noteworthy that few participants mentioned more self-serving motivators such as salary increases or higher status.

Conclusion

This study sought to better understand the motivations and lived experiences of aspiring school leaders enrolled in graduate principal preparatory programs. Findings show that several key factors contributed to participants developing a leadership identity: early life leadership experiences, leadership modeling, and leadership opportunities in their professions. Findings also show that participants are primarily motivated by altruistic factors such as changing the educational system, addressing equity and inclusion for underserved students, and serving their communities. Finally, when comparing participants across independent and public schools, there were no distinct differences in factors that led to leadership identity development or in motivating factors.

Understanding that lived experiences go beyond the school building, we find that aspiring leaders begin to self-identify through sports, tutoring, parent role-modeling, and other extracurricular and social activity. This, too, has implications as we consider how principal pipelines are developed outside of the four walls of the schoolhouse.

It is of particular interest that independent school and public school teachers, despite sometimes different professional preparation and teaching experiences, identified remarkably similar experiences and motivating factors, encouraging further research to more deeply explore the particular experiences and motivators that propelled teachers to choose public versus independent schools. Additionally, more research is needed to determine how the experiences and motivations identified in this study correlate with effectiveness as a principal – knowing that an aspiring principal and an effective principal are not one and the same.

Recommendations

The findings from this study have significant implications for current and aspiring school leaders. Currently serving school principals are uniquely positioned to impact several of the key experiences identified in this study: youth leadership experiences, opportunities for teacher leadership, and leadership role modeling. First, as most participants identified formative leadership experiences at a young age, we encourage principals to consider increased attention to quality youth leadership opportunities for students. Second, principals should consider purposeful tapping (Myung et al., 2011) of educators who exhibit potential or desire for school leadership. Elevation to teacher-leadership roles, including PLC lead, coach, or other school leadership positions, consistently surfaced as a shared experience across participants and was instrumental in self-identifying as a leader. Third, principals must recognize the power of purposeful modeling, both in their role as a leader and in facilitating partnerships between early-career educators and other building leaders, contributing to future leaders' observational learning (Lord & Hall, 2005). Finally, it is essential for principals to understand that teachers are acutely aware of principals who model poor leadership as well as those who model effective or positive leadership.

Despite nearly half of the participants being private school educators, findings did not reveal any significant differences between the experiences and motivations of public and private school aspiring leaders. This is not to say that there are no differences. However, given the nature and bounds of this study, we believe that fundamental experiences and motivators could be attributable to most aspiring school leaders, regardless of their particular educational system or setting. Still, to better understand these similarities as well as what differences may exist, further research investigating and comparing the backgrounds of public and private school aspiring leaders is needed.

Kearney (2010) notes that the altruistic motivators of giving back to the community, guiding teachers, and having a broader influence over the school and community are often overshadowed by the negative impacts of accountability pressure, lack of support and job security, and demanding schedules. As this study is focused on those who are not yet principals, it would be interesting to understand participants' perceptions of the role and their motivations after some time in the principalship. Does serving in the role of the principalship shift motivations? If so, how does this impact retention over time?

Limitations

There are limitations to this study. First, all participants are enrolled in the same university principal preparation program in the Southeastern United States, although they work in various school settings (both public and independent). Thus, the results of the study are specific to this context. The small sample size of nineteen prevents statistical-probabilistic generalizability. However, readers may experience naturalistic generalizability based on the recognition of similarities and differences to the results with which the reader is familiar (Smith, 2018), regardless of geographic

location. Finally, the data collected were based on participants' written reflections and, thus, may have yielded a different result than an oral interview. Despite these limitations, this study provides insight into the motivations and factors that led the participants to aspire to a school leadership position.

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Appendix

Life Story Narrative Prompt

Compose a "life story" narrative detailing why you are interested in becoming a school leader. What events have occurred so far in your careers that indicate to you that you have a proclivity towards leadership? What is it about the leadership role that feels right despite the challenges that may lie in wait? Include a brief analysis of the degree to which diversity issues have influenced your professional/personal development. From where does the motivation to lead others come?

Leadership Platform Paper Prompt

Create a summary leadership platform paper describing your evolving perspective on the concept of leadership. The paper will cover your initial definitions and conceptions of leadership, where those conceptions came from (the self-reflection piece), a declaration/explanation of your personal leadership style*, and your thoughts about how you will affect organizational improvement (and why those thoughts are valid/important). You should also discuss how you see issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion in schools and how you might work to address issues in those areas. The substance of the paper should reflect a scholarly approach blending leadership theory, other texts we have covered in class, and your experiential self-awareness analyses. You are welcome to use other texts as well.

*You should integrate self-assessment tool data (the Leadership Style Diagnostic (LSD) tool) - will be covered in class in November.

This paper should be a synthesis of your work/readings/discussions from this course.