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Stakeholder Experiences in District-University Administrator Preparation Partnerships

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Our qualitative study explores the lived experiences of district stakeholders in university-district leadership preparation programs. Collaborative partnerships between school districts and universities focused on developing quality school leader are a part of recent efforts to provide the field of public education with exemplary leadership. The stakeholder experience in these partnerships is a little understood phenomenon lacking research. Thirteen district stakeholders in grant funded leadership development partnerships participated in the phenomenology informed study. Findings show that prior experiences, trust, issues of time, sustainability, and the power to build bridges were critical components of the district stakeholder experience in partnerships.

The need for the development of educational leaders equipped to tackle the challenges evident in American education has spawned a plethora of school district–university partnerships focused on developing quality school leaders (Fultz & Davis, 2014). As early as 1987, education reformers asserted that as difficult as partnerships can be to create and sustain, quality reform requires community collaboration (Comer, 1987). Spurred by higher expectations and shrinking resources educators were motivated to give every consideration to the benefits of utilizing the power of inter-organizational collaborations (Goldring & Sims, 2005), such as district–university partnerships.

School district leaders possess an institutional knowledge of the district itself to help inform the development of the partnership and an understanding of the administrative practices necessary for principals and assistant principals to be effective in their schools, whereas university personnel possess expertise in the realm of research and theory (Belle & Sanzo, 2014; Borthwick, Stirling, Nauman, & Cook, 2003). The process of developing effective district–university partnerships focused on administrator preparation must include the selection of representatives from each organization to design, build, and facilitate the partnership activities (Sanzo, 2016). These representatives, or stakeholders, are key to the successful development and implementation of the joint educational leadership development ventures (Mast, Scribner, & Sanzo, 2011). Selected stakeholders are presented with a unique opportunity to create, define, and shape these partnerships; bringing with them to this collaborative effort their varied ideals and values (Mast, Scribner, & Sanzo, 2011). However, there is a dearth of research examining the critical role of district-level stakeholder and the stakeholder experiences in these partnerships (Sanzo, 2016). Therefore, an investigation of education partnership stakeholders’ unique relationships and experiences in this meaningful type of work forms the foundation for our research.

This paper provides the findings from a qualitative study informed by the phenomenological methodology examining the lived experiences of district stakeholders in university-district partnerships. The following provides our conceptual and theoretical background, the methods for the study, findings, and discussion.

The Need for Effective School Leadership Preparation Programs

The demand for effective school leadership has been tied to research that often portrays principals as the linchpins for school improvement (Belle & Sanzo, 2014; Leithwood, Seahore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008; Myung, Loeb, & Horng, 2011; Burt, Shen, Leneway, & Rainey, 2014). Lashway (2003) noted that as standards-based school reform neared its 20th anniversary, policymakers continued to assert the need for strong principal leadership. The job of the principal is constantly evolving, while the number of prepared and qualified applicants are decreasing. Myung et al. (2011), in their study of the principal pipeline, reported that “Although the need for effective school leaders has intensified based on the current performance of schools, many school districts across America struggle to find qualified candidates to fill vacant school leadership positions” (p. 696). Retirements, career options, and the constantly publicized ills of the nation’s educational system are among the factors that exacerbate this phenomenon. Furthermore, this problem has been found to be even more pronounced in communities serving large proportions of students attending secondary schools, students of low socioeconomic status, large populations of minority students, or students who do not speak English as their first language (Myung et al., 2011).

A close examination of the literature on principal school leadership shortages reveals the problem is much more complex than just an inadequate supply to meet the growing demand of school leaders. Districts are not facing a labor shortage inasmuch as they are facing a shortage of laborers with the right skills (Myung et al., 2011). This unparalleled demand for effective leadership in education requires a multitude of high quality leadership preparation programs.

University-District Partnerships

The continued search for an effective mechanism to assist with the preparation of school administrators has led educational leaders to critically examine the concepts of collaboration and partnerships (Belle & Sanzo, 2014; Burt, Shen, Leneway, & Rainey, 2014; Sanzo, 2016). The development of meaningful collaborative partnerships has now become a common interest of many universities and community entities (Belle & Sanzo, 2014; King, 2014; Sanzo, 2016; Strier, 2011). Federal, state, and foundations have funded research projects to explore different approaches to leadership preparation in recent decades, looking especially at the extent to which school districts influence the critical work of their university collaborators (Fultz & Davis, 2014; Browne-Ferrigno & Barber, 2010).

The Need for Partnerships

Developing sustainable partnerships in the business community has been an important strategy to effectively meet company goals. This strategy has increasingly seen more prominence in the education community as well. According to Barnes and Phillips (2000)

Most public sector organizations, including higher education institutions, now operate within a framework reliant on partnerships for the successful delivery of service and projects. In a complex and diverse world, in which power is diffused, it has been argued that effective governance may only be achieved by building on formal inter-sectoral partnerships. (p. 184)

Research supports the effectiveness of partnerships with institutions of higher learning as a strategy for a community wanting to improve the quality of life for its citizens (Leiderman, Furco, Zapf, & Goss, 2004). This marriage of community–municipal organizations and universities allows both entities to bring their knowledge, experience, and resources to the problem-solving arena. The ability of a partnership to understand and address complex problems, however, is related to who is involved in the partnership, how community stakeholders are involved, and the leadership and management of the partnership (Lasker & Weiss, 2003).

School Leader Development Partnerships

Proponents of university–district partnerships profess that for redesigned leadership preparation programs to be maximally effective, development of the partnership of the school district with the university is one of the most important contributing factors (Harchar & Campbell, 2010; Sanzo, 2016). This joint effort, combining research-based theory with on-the-job practice, provides the best possible combination of experiences to promote job success (Davis, Leon, & Fultz, 2012). Also, this two-tiered approach provides participating individuals with meaningful, contextually, relevant and well-focused intent (Kin, 2014; Mast, Scribner, & Sanzo, 2011; Sanzo, Myran, & Clayton, 2011) as it effectively helps participants span the chasm between theory and

practice. This type of partnership is not successful without collaboration between both university and district level stakeholders.

Faculty members possess the research skills necessary to conduct rigorous research and connect their findings to PK-12 practice; but the active engagement of practicing school leaders to serve provides authenticity (Sanzo et al., 2011; Sanzo, 2016). Active involvement of both school district and university personnel avoid the questions of authenticity and provide a vital connect to “real practice.” University–district partnerships provide opportunities for both colleges and school districts to bring their strengths to the problem of building an adequate cadre of school leaders. Storms and Gonzalez (2006) noted that building relationships between school districts and universities that are perceived by both entities as effectively meeting their needs is central to the work of forming these partnerships.

Stakeholders

Our goal was to begin to understand the district stakeholder experience in university-district partnerships, as this is a poorly understood and critical group involved in leadership development partnerships between universities and districts. To help us understand the stakeholder experience better, we drew upon business literature, including research and theory, as both conceptual and theoretical underpinnings for our study. For the purpose of this study, we have operationally defined *stakeholder* as a person selected by either a PreK-12 school district or university to help develop the framework and implementation plan for a district–university partnership, focused on school leadership while representing the interests of the school district or university. Stakeholders possess three attributes. The first is power, or the extent to which a stakeholder has or can gain access to coercive, utilitarian, or normative means to impose his or her will in the relationship. The second attribute is legitimacy, the degree to which a stakeholder relationship is seen as appropriate, proper, and desirable in the social context. The third attribute is urgency, when the work to be done is of a time-sensitive nature and when the work is important or critical to the stakeholder (Oates, 2013).

Stakeholder Theory

The actions of stakeholders in collaborative partnerships are not random, having their basis in many years of stakeholder theory research. Drawing on sociology, economics, politics, and ethics, stakeholder theory provides the research background to support how stakeholders with similar interests form and operate as groups. This theory of stakeholder action is recognizable in the interactions between stakeholders selected to represent school districts and universities in their collaborative partnerships. According to the work of Mainardes, Alves, and Raposa (2012), the core assumptions of stakeholder theory include the following: Organizations engage in relationships with groups that influence or are influenced by them; relationships are examined through process and results; the interests of legitimate stakeholders are of intrinsic value and no single set of interests prevails over others; an ultimate focus on managerial decision making; stakeholders seek to influence organizational decision-making processes, so they become consistent with their needs and priorities; and organizations must strive to understand, reconcile and balance the needs of all stakeholders.

Myllykangas, Kujala, and Lehtimäki (2011) stated the core assumptions of this theory help create value for stakeholders. In the stakeholder literature, value creation is examined as a

relational, rather than a transactional, exchange. In partnerships, such as those that exist between universities and school districts, this stakeholder value creation is challenged and extended to the development of relationships that are manifested through cooperation, collaboration, and network influences. The development and maintenance of favorable and productive stakeholder relationships is regarded as essential in creating real value in successful partnerships. Frooman brought forth the idea that “though stakeholder theory has traditionally emphasized the individuals in the relationships, and not the relationships themselves, the relationships developed between stakeholders may tell as much about how the actors will interact as the individual attributes of the actors” (Frooman, 1998, p. 192).

Stakeholder Experience

The competing interests that stakeholders bring to a partnership can make it difficult for them to balance their responsibilities with their assigned tasks. Organizational performance is related to organizational objectives, and such objectives are partly determined by the organization’s response to conflicting stakeholder demands (Oates, 2013). Stakeholders not only are judged by organizations and partners based on the social constructs of their legitimacy, but they are also classified in the literature by their respective levels of importance, or stakeholder salience. This classification structure takes into account aspects of the stakeholder’s role as it relates to effectiveness in partnerships.

Trust in Stakeholder Relationships

New approaches to problem solving are required for partnering arrangements, such as district–university partnerships, to be effective. Problem solving in the context of partnerships rests not on traditional authority structures and systems, however, but on the foundation of relationships and trust (Getha-Taylor, 2012). Trust, a morally desirable characteristic of relationships (Jones & Wicks, 1999), is a key feature impacting the success of stakeholders in working collaboratively as partners and is a foundational aspect of cross-sector partnerships that must be preserved to maintain them. Countless efforts by companies and organizations to work together to tackle some of the most complex challenges of the day have failed because of competitive self-interest, a lack of a fully shared purpose, and, most importantly, a shortage of trust (Nidumolu, Ellison, Whalen, & Billman, 2014).

Greenwood (2006) added that trust also entails an expectation of morally correct performance, guiding the trusting parties to place themselves in positions of dependence and vulnerability because they believe the trusted party will act for the greater good. Greenwood and Van Buren (2010), in their review of trustworthiness in organizations and its connection to stakeholder theory, noted that there had been considerable academic work within the business literature focusing on trust and fairness in stakeholder–organization relations. Although organizational trustworthiness does not create an ethical obligation for stakeholders to hold fast to the objectives and interests of their parent organization, it does provide a means by which ethical obligations are more likely to be positively discharged. This idea of stakeholder management has long been recognized as a central part of any organization’s effectiveness, especially in building partnerships.

The process of building and sustaining collaborative trust in developing and maintaining partnerships can be complicated by a host of issues. Some of these potential challenges include

prior conflicts, hidden or different agendas, personality clashes, competition among partners, lack of accountability, lack of information sharing, and power differentials (Getha-Taylor, 2012). These challenges to developing trust can be overcome as leaders of organizations share information, work on building relationships, model openness, offer assistance, make good on commitments, and earn others' support by sharing credit, keeping confidences, and being trustworthy (Getha-Taylor, 2012).

Methods

The goal of this study was to examine the professional lived experiences of school district stakeholders involved in creating and implementing school district–university leadership development partnerships. Our research was guided by the following question: What is the experience of primary stakeholders (school district) in the development and implementation of school–university partnerships focused on administrator preparation? As phenomenology is rooted in examining the essence of direct lived experience, this qualitative research study is informed by this research tradition; its tenets meld easily with the investigation and its research questions. Phenomenology guides the researcher to explore and understand the everyday experiences of others without presupposing knowledge of those experiences (Converse, 2012).

Participants

Thirteen participants were selected through purposeful sampling. The directors of district–university partnership programs funded through the United States Department of Education's School Leadership Program (SLP) grants were contacted to obtain information about district stakeholders currently or recently working with their partnerships. Once confirmed as district stakeholders by the partnership directors they were invited by email to participate in our qualitative research study. Represented are four rural school districts with 1,000 to 2,300 students, six suburban school districts with 5,500 to 20,000 students, and three urban school districts with 39,000–640,000 students. Of the 13 participants in the sample, four currently participate or recently participated in school district–university partnerships in rural settings, seven currently participate or recently participated in partnerships in suburban settings, and two currently participate or recently participated in partnerships in urban settings.

Data Collection and Analysis

We used an open-ended interview protocol (Appendix A) as a framework for the interviews, allowing participants to share information from their viewpoints and experiences. We encouraged the participants to become involved in the structure and process of the interviews, which potentially gave rise to a more robust representation of their voices, thereby providing more reliable, comparable qualitative data (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). During the recorded interviews, each participant was prompted by questions designed to gain information about the historical perspective of the stakeholder, the stakeholder experience, the stakeholder role in starting partnerships, the stakeholder role in sustaining partnerships, interactions between stakeholders, trust between stakeholders, and challenges for stakeholders.

Data collected through the 13 semistructured interviews were reduced to patterns and themes through the process of coding. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and then shared

with the participants for confirmation that they adequately represented the interview sessions. The research team met to discuss the protocols for the data analysis process, and then shared the participant-reviewed transcriptions. The transcriptions were initially reviewed by the research team for content and then reviewed again for the selection of key words and phrases representing the experiences of the participants. This process of horizontalization served to provide initial open codes, which were discussed in the context of both the individual interview questions and the interview questions categories (background, behavior, opinion, knowledge, feeling, closing question). The research team for consensus coding critically reviewed the open codes. Through the process of consensus coding the research team merged codes based on interpreting the transcripts and research team discussions, leading to the emergence of themes and subthemes. The coding process concluded when the researcher team reached the point where no additional themes emerged.

Findings

The Value of Prior Experiences

Most participants had some level of prior experience with universities. Whether having served as adjunct or part-time teaching staff, or in some other capacity, there was an established connection that supported the willingness of university staff to partner with the school districts. One southwest stakeholder, Dr. Willie Sauer, boasted strong connections with universities,

I've had personal relationships with the universities because I've taught at them, so I've had partnerships. I've done other things with universities through my affiliations as a part-time faculty member. I had connections, so when we had this need then I called people I knew at the university who might be able to help us!

One theme that emerged from the interviews was the impact of career experiences to each stakeholder's role in district-university partnerships. Comments were shared such as, "This came into my lap because of other work that I had been doing in the field," and "Because I was already working as a director supervising those principals, I believe I was asked to be a part of the initiative." The career pathways indicated were varied but all shared common opportunities to develop as education professionals, while gaining valuable knowledge and skills critical to working collaboratively with universities. Dr. Eliza Baugher, a retired administrator from a Midwest urban district, was working with administrator preparation in other localities across the United States. When the position to work with her home district and the local university around the concept of creating an administrative pipeline was posted, application was eminent, with Dr. Baugher coming into the position with a thorough knowledge of the infrastructure of the school district, and with a past relationship with the university. She shared,

So there are lots of different pieces and parts that fit together. It's been an evolving process. This work has been a passion of mine throughout my career; to help others, to be able to mentor and coach people to help them be successful. It's hugely rewarding.

Dr. Cristin Barraza, another urban district stakeholder from the southwest, was serving as a lecturer at the university, and co-teaching in a principal institute program, forging a strong

connection to the university that could only support the development of a district-university partnership. She stated, “These relationships start in working with universities to design curriculum for improving leadership development, leadership skills, and then the relationships extend to other projects.” Because these professionals were already involved with their partnering universities in many different ways, they were easily and purposefully drawn into the district stakeholder role, maximizing the power of their prior connections.

Additionally, several of the respondents were involved in administrative leadership organizations or district leadership development initiatives prior to their roles as district stakeholders. One midwestern district stakeholder, Dr. Ivonne Blanke, was involved with a center for school effectiveness and education policy organization, when the district-university partnership opportunity surfaced.

Dr. Elihu Lynch, another midwestern district stakeholder served on a district level principal redesign committee in the role of assistant superintendent representing the district’s interests. In both instances, these professionals were intensely connected to the work of administrator preparation, but through alternative organizations. Their routes to the district stakeholder role were presented as direct and intentional, as they reported being already immersed in much of the work of the partnerships.

Trust As A Lever To Building Partnerships

Many of the school districts represented in this research study have been actively involved in collaborative relationships with universities for years. For example, Dr. Ava Turner, a veteran district stakeholder stated:

I think that the university and our school district have been engaged for over 100 years, so we don’t even think about it being a trusting relationship anymore. It’s just always been; you know what I mean? Like peanut butter and jelly, we go together. But if I ever had to think about why it seems right and comfortable and appropriate to do things with them, then the word trust would probably be what comes out, but it’s just because it’s historic that you don’t think about it. It just exists.

Because of the historical relationship that is already in existence, the partnerships serve to deepen the trust between the school districts and universities.

Most of us know our stakeholders at the university level, and also in the surrounding districts. So, I don’t remember trust being an issue just because we’ve worked together on so many other things. We have to, and when you’re a small, rural school districts like we are, you have to work together.

As the district stakeholders shared the specifics of their prior relationships with the universities serving as partners in their SLP grant programs, it was evident these experiences were key to establishing an environment of trust. Having a professional relationship with the partnering university was paramount to building the trusting relationships necessary for the development of a successful partnership. Dr. Duggan shared, “Trust was visible in our commitment to the work...we were clear about what the outcomes were going to be.”

Some school district stakeholders did not have a longstanding relationship in place between the district and the university. These stakeholders also viewed trust as imperative, but realized the additional responsibility of helping to build positive working relationship between the two participating entities. In the words of southwest district stakeholder, Dr. Cristen Barraza,

Trust is definitely a factor. I think a lot of it is unspoken. It has to do with building relationships through meetings, through face time. You need a venue that is pleasing and welcoming, with food provided. These are the kinds of things that, on a human level, on an interpersonal level, become very important for building trust.

Dr. Lynch, an assistant superintendent serving as a district stakeholder from a suburban midwestern district added, “The quality of the interactions, and the way we worked with each other that helped to pull people to the other side of the street, to begin to pull them over to say, let me get on board.”

Collaboration required trust in these partnerships and several barometers to measure the level of trust surfaced in the conversations. The visibility of trust in the commitments was evidenced through all parties meeting deadlines, having agendas for meetings to focus the work, and always having clarity about expected outcomes. Transparency was presented as an important indicator of trust in action in district-university partnerships. “A component of having trust is transparency. When I referenced that session where we were co-constructing goals, I think that was crucial as an example of how transparency was enacted,” said Dr. Barraza. The sentiment of the district stakeholders was that all stakeholders must make a conscious effort to always be clear and upfront about their expectations and determine shared goals so that the work remains focused on program development and implementation. Dr. Candi Cybulski, a midwestern district stakeholder, confronted this issue saying,

I think you realize a level of trust when people are comfortable coming to the table and laying their agendas there, instead of hiding them and trying to manipulate the system into what they need. You have to be really honest about what your needs and what your challenges are, and what your opportunities are if you want to be really transparent.

The quality of personal interactions is another strong indicator of trust suggested by the respondents. “Everybody has to be face to face at the conference table, to share what our respective goals are, and try to come to terms with how we’re going to align all of that,” Dr. Cristen Barraza contributed. Time together, sharing ideas, and working toward common goals is a large part of what was shared as critical to building the kind of trusting relationships that will yield high performing district–university partnerships. The reality of building trust and its role as a lever was presented by the participants as each entity openly expressed needs and wants, with decision making occurring in a spirit of collaboration.

Issues Of Time

District stakeholders stated they were often confronted with solving problems around competing schedules and ability to find time to complete the program activities for their district employees in the preparation partnership. This was an area of tension for the stakeholders, often being

“caught in the middle” between the university and their own supervisors, whether that was a superintendent, a school board, or another leader in the district.

Selected aspiring administrators in the partnership programs were already full-time employees serving in a variety of roles in the districts. In one of the midwestern partnerships, the district stakeholder informs that participants in their program are offered a 16-week immersion in a school, and a substitute takes their classroom.

The substitute must be highly functioning and highly engaging to make sure that the children are reached and that they have a chance of doing well! That’s the only drawback to this. The positive is that the aspiring administrator gets a really authentic experience being with the principal day to day, and they love it.

Dr. Ava Turner, representing a suburban school district, shared:

Even though we want authenticity, having interns complete their program requirements while missing time with their students will not work. We must always meet our responsibility to the students in the classrooms. I am absolutely supportive of redesign and the internship, but there has to be another version, another iteration.

The stakeholders were challenged by district leaderships’ inquiries into the amount of time the partnership activities would take. District stakeholders expressed their leaderships’ concerns, with one stakeholder stating, “There were several times when events were scheduled during the regular school day, and we had recommended they try not to pull teachers from the classroom.” Superintendent Dr. Mandel Strieff remembers being asked by the school board, “How much time was it going to require for teachers? How much time is it going to require of them outside of the classroom and affect their instructional day-to-day job?” The school board also wanted to know how involved the superintendent was going to be in the process: “How much of your time was this going to take?” Dr. Strieff responded,

I had to explain the benefits that this brings back. If you have a superintendent who is also enhancing his or her instructional performance levels, they are constantly bringing the research back to the schools to help build teachers’ and principals’ abilities, and hopefully this will result in better student achievement.

The school board accepted the superintendent’s explanation, but this issue of real organizational commitment in terms of time continues to sometimes be a challenge for district stakeholders.

This issue of time was not limited to the smaller school districts in the southeast. Dr. Barazza, representing a very large urban southwest school district, was challenged with related concerns. Due to the size of the metropolitan area in which the school district resides, effectively scheduling activities that can be accessible to all participants was difficult. “On a simpler, logistical level, the ability to meet face to face is a challenge. In our district in K-12 education, our days are very structured, very limited – kind of inflexible time,” the urban district stakeholder, shared. Dr. Eliza Baugher, also from a large urban district, has faced the same challenges. Issues of time continue to be mentioned by district leadership. Concerns about staffing the programs and pulling staff away from their “primary duties” are issues that have to be addressed if the partnerships are going to continue and be successful.

Sustainability

District stakeholders were forthright in sharing their thoughts about the continuation of currently successful administrator preparation partnerships. Dr. Elihu Lynch described the concern about sustainability: “How is this going to be sustained over time? Will we have the dollars to continue to pour into not only what we do with interns, but pouring into our own administrators?” Dr. Eliza Baugher, representing her state’s partnership included in the sample shared similar concerns: “We have the same concerns that probably everybody involved in working in education have—that would be time and money. This work is now totally supported by SLP. There’s hands-on and support like office space—that kind of thing.” Dr. Lynch expressed staffing concerns that loomed around the continuation of the collaborative district–university partnership: “But the other prevalent concern, probably even beyond funding was, how is this going to be overseen or supervised or monitored or taken care of in our own district? Somebody will always have to take responsibility for it!” Commitment by participating school districts and universities has to equate to budgeting for these administrator preparation programs, and to providing the infrastructure to support the effort. “Hopefully, the formal, legal memoranda of understandings signed by both the districts and university partners outlining roles and responsibilities will provide guidance to district and university leadership,” shared partnership stakeholder, Dr. Annmaria Lakey, as they look at the future of the great work of district–university partnerships in supporting the professional learning of aspiring administrators.

Power of Building Bridges

District–university partnerships were reported as good experiences by all of the district stakeholders interviewed. The essence of the positive experiences and positive feelings presented by the participants in the study comes from a deep belief in the power and common sense of relationships to enhance the work of the stakeholders. Dr. Mortie Kieran brought home this concept of power in relationships, sharing that

When you start looking at that it makes all the sense in the world that if you get an opportunity to work that closely with somebody from higher learning, then you take it. There was no reason not to take it in my opinion. We went forward with it as we always look for opportunities to partner with them or any university. We all benefit from joint efforts between LEAs and universities to develop and provide opportunities for folks.

This idea of building bridges between organizations defines the intent of the district stakeholders as they entered into collaboration with their partnering universities. Southeast stakeholder, Mrs. Erin Walker shared,

We were able to build relationships with the people at the university. So it seemed really smooth. It was really seamless as far as how we implemented the process. There was no stress in trying to meet the requirements that they had, because of the regular interactions we shared. It was professionally satisfying, continuing ... We had a lot of latitude in helping to shape the partnership. As far as developing and providing opportunities for folks and then helping to monitor the process, helping the placement process; all of that

was definitely a joint effort between the LEAs and the university. We all benefitted from that.

The perspective on building bridges from one of the southwestern urban districts was different, but connected to the southeastern experience, as shared by Dr. Barraza:

What I love is seeing a different pair of eyes. When I come to work with university professors, what I find is a lot of openness. I like the dialogue that we have with the university professors. I like their ability to question what our practices are, what we're doing, and for what purpose. I think it brings a greater level or richness to the work that we are doing. Sometimes we become a little bit insular, and this is a way for us to open up and expand our thinking and our own learning. I really enjoy it.

Defining and implementing district-university partnerships focused on administrator preparation require, from both entities, a commitment to creating connections or expanding prior connections. These "bridges" provide the framework on which the collaboration and programming can be constructed. Dr. Annmaria Lakey gave another perspective to the concept of building bridges between organizations in district-university partnerships. She credits the stakeholders as the connection that makes the partnerships work:

I think one piece that we found out through this partnership and myself getting to play the middleman, that there has to be a bridge between the university and the school district, and both have to learn and grow together if we want to produce highly effective school leaders to impact student growth and achievement, and shape what we are going to have in the future of education.

With SLP grants providing the initial funding to support the efforts, district and university leadership continue to look at building the capacity needed for the partnerships to impact school leadership preparation for some time to come.

Discussion

The stakeholders presented themselves through the interviews as agents of change in collaboration with their university counterparts. The business literature documents the significance of the stakeholder role to the ultimate success of partnerships like joint ventures, alliances, and consortia within the public sector. Stakeholders are often the risk takers or influencers in situations where decisions are being made by collaborative partnerships and the interviews supported this (Mitchell et al, 1997).

Supporting the concept that some problems are best managed through a collective effort (Savage et al., 2010), the district stakeholders' efforts, in part, resulted in school districts and universities coming together through structured collaboration to serve as a problem solving mechanism, focusing on issues like the effective use of resources, uniting theory and practice, and enhancing work in the field through innovation. While always serving in the role of a claimant, maintaining a stake in the organization, these stakeholders also effectively serve as influencers, reinforcing the assertion that in district-university partnerships both the role of the claimant and influencer have merit.

District stakeholders have power - the ability to exercise their own will in the face of making decisions that will support the goals of the school districts (Neville & Mengue, 2006). It was also shown that the stakeholders have legitimacy – from observations of their behavior throughout the partnership efforts and the nature of the individual and his or her knowledge (Santana, 2012). Lastly the stakeholders exhibited urgency – demanding the attention of those they represent with motivation to take action as warranted (Myllykangas et al., 2011).

The Value of Prior Experiences.

Our examination of the professional world of the participants revealed they all arrived at their district stakeholder partnership role following an array of professional opportunities. Despite the diversity in their past experiences, there were common threads that were evident based on the location of their school districts (rural, suburban, or urban), prior connections to universities, and other vital connections to their communities. District stakeholders having pre-partnership relationships and experiences with university colleagues were able to come into the district-university partnership effort with a direct connection to the culture and protocols of the university already in place. This impact was in place across all represented school districts, rural; suburban; or urban. Pre-partnership relationships discussed included serving as adjunct faculty, working with teacher education programs, or serving as a superintendent invested in a prior relationship with the university. Prior experiences were most impactful in helping to develop the skills needed to construct positive working relationships with colleagues. These skills were found to be maximally transferable to the role of building collaborative working relationships with university stakeholders.

Trust as a Lever to Building Partnerships.

In all aspects of the partnership effort, trust was evident as an integral part of the fabric of the collaboration. For district stakeholders who presented as having historical ties to universities through other projects and activities, trust was a key component of the ability of the school district to successfully work in collaboration with the university. When trusting relationships were already present, the developing partnership around administrator preparation served to deepen the trust making it easier for partnerships to extend to solving new problems. Similarly, for stakeholders whose school districts presented as having limited to no prior connections to universities, trust was offered as important for the development and implementation of partnerships, with the stakeholders giving special attention to creating the conditions that foster trust.

In situations where trust was not initially in place, both the school districts and the universities made concerted efforts to develop positive working relationships and build trust. The spirit of cooperation, that trust supports, facilitates human interaction and makes collaborative partners much less willing to act in ways that express self-interest. This was evident through the comments and shared anecdotes presented by the district stakeholders, supporting the contention that trust matters (Ossola, 2013).

Issues of Time

The district stakeholders represented in this research, provided through their interviews, evidence of their commitment to the work of improving K-12 administrator preparation. They also provided evidence of reasons to be concerned about the total organizational commitment of their school districts to this work; issues of time reference providing aspiring principals adequate release time for professional learning sessions, without them having to worry about classroom coverage. Also, program activities have to be scheduled keeping in mind the fact that program administrators and aspiring administrators already have full-time jobs with full-time job responsibilities.

The Power of Building Bridges.

Partnerships have their best chance to be successful when stakeholders focus their efforts on the common elements that connect their work. Stakeholder theory asserts the actions of stakeholders in collaborative partnerships is not random, with the theory identifying how they seek to influence organizational decision making connected to needs and priorities (Mainardes, Alva & Raposa, 2012). Critically examining these needs and aligning organizational priorities is much of the work of building bridges between school districts and universities. Building bridges between school districts and universities does require from both organizations a commitment to creating connections and maximizing the opportunities provided by expanding former associations. Each organization is challenged to put in place and maintain the structures needed to insure that collaboration is a part of its culture. Through the development of meaningful, trusting relationships, the conditions for building the bridges needed for district-university partnerships to thrive are stimulated.

Implications

Themes generated from this research provide insights into the professional lived experiences of district stakeholders as they work in collaboration with their university counterparts. We examined the value of district stakeholders having prior experiences with universities as a factor in their ability to effectively collaborate with university stakeholders, discovered the role of trust as a lever in building the relationships needed for effective collaboration between school districts and higher education, and uncovered issues of time and funding as factors impacting the ability of stakeholders to implement effective partnerships. We also discovered the power of building bridges between organizations as pertinent to collaborative partnerships meeting their goals.

There are a number of implications for school district and university stakeholders as they seek to continue to partner in the name of K-12 administrator preparation. These implications are rooted in the value of organizations intentionally creating opportunities for their stakeholders to build relationships with each other. For this to happen, prior connections have to be maximized as occasions for school districts and universities to further engage with each other. In situations where adequate connections do not exist, school districts and universities have to actively seek out opportunities to connect and share their expertise. District stakeholders articulated through their interview responses that the development of collaborative partnerships was much more efficient and effective when school districts and universities have a historical

relationship. School districts and universities must use the power of their combined areas of expertise to collaborate.

Trust has tremendous impact on the ability of stakeholders to work collaboratively in partnerships to problem solve and overcome obstacles. Throughout the interviews, the respondents hailed the importance of trust to successfully implementing district–university partnerships and lauded its role in constructing opportunities for effective collaboration. In situations where there has been a historical relationship between school districts and universities, trust is easier to foster than those that did not. When the institutions do not have a historical relationship, however, the stakeholders of both entities must actively work to build a trusting working relationship. Implications for developing trust with other partnering organizations include a focus on transparency in all aspects of developing and implementing partnerships, working to have quality personal interactions with the other stakeholders, and developing common goals with shared decision-making. For university leaders, the implications are similar, as their willingness and ability to build trusting relationships with school district leadership will help define the quality and success of partnership efforts.

The discussions around time and funding focused on dimensions of sustainability. Partners must be aware of the complexities of each other’s schedules and to schedule activities so they do not interfere with the primary job responsibilities of the participants. Failure to be aware of this can cause the initiative to fail. Additionally, early success of a partnership can be derailed if there is not attention given to the long-term funding implications for the partnership. Implications include ensuring program activities fit within the district’s instructional program and organizational commitment to leadership development and ensuring there is the support of the school board and superintendent required for long-term partnership effort. The power of “building bridges” can support sustainability of the partnership, too. Bridges, or connections between organizations, provide a framework for fostering collaboration and partnerships. Implications further include school districts and universities actively looking for reasons to work as a team, through grants, community development needs, and internal program improvement efforts. Building bridges can help organizations build capacity, leading to increased opportunities for building collaborative partnerships.

Recommendations for Future Study

Future research should focus on extending this research into non-grant funded partnerships. Additionally, an exploration into site specific partnerships (rural, suburban, and urban) can help partnership developers better understand the unique needs of each district type. Additionally, future research could also support extending the data collection sample to include not only school district stakeholders, but also the university stakeholders serving as collaborative partners. Interviewing stakeholder pairs would provide, for the researcher, both perspectives on the stakeholder experience as the culture of each partnering organization impacts the lens of the stakeholders as they answer the interview questions.

Conclusion

Our investigation into the lived professional experiences of school district stakeholders participating in partnerships sheds light into a little understood stakeholder group in leadership preparation programs. The respondents shared their joys, their fears, and their struggles in

pursuit of designing and implementing administrator preparation programming to support the ongoing needs of leadership development in their school districts. Despite the work and uncertainty that often engulfs the world of district-university partnerships, the district stakeholders reported they felt highly valued and appreciated for all of the work they were doing to further the cause of administrator preparation. They also expressed the work provided, for them, opportunities for continuous learning and that the relationships that they developed with other stakeholders and program participants were vitally important to the success of the partnerships.

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Appendix A – Interview Questions

- Q1 - What is your experience level as a participant involved in developing a school district–university partnership focused on administration preparation?
- Q2 - How were you selected to serve in the capacity as a stakeholder representing your school district in this partnership effort?
- Q3 - What is it about the school district–university partnership concept that interests you?
- Q4 - Describe your experience as a selected stakeholder for the (school district) in the development of this partnerships focused on school administrator preparation and development?
- Q5 - What common concerns did the (school district) stakeholders share about the process of developing this partnership?
- Q6 - What common concerns did all of the stakeholders share about the process of developing this specific partnership?
- Q7 - How was this school district–university partnerships started? Were the stakeholder groups assembled and given explicit direction? Was the process open ended?
- Q8 - What defines the mission and objective(s) of this partnership?
- Q9 - Describe the connection between the stakeholder group and the school district and university in terms of progress monitoring the work of the group. How is this handled?
- Q10 - As a (school district) partnership stakeholder, how did you feel about your role in helping to shape the developing collaborative partnership?
- Q11 - Was trust a factor in the development and success of this partnership? How was trust realized in this partnership?
- Q12 - Do you have any closing thoughts about school district–university partnerships and stakeholder groups?