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Simulations in educational leadership internship programs

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On my very first day as a middle school principal with 2,100 students, I realized that the experiences I had up until that point prepared me for what was happening. I had been a teacher, resource teacher, and assistant principal. In what seemed like a whirlwind, I was introduced to the faculty and staff that had been without a principal for the first month of the school year and were waiting for “the new principal to solve” pending issues, and I was informed that my school would open as a special needs hurricane shelter a few hours later. I knew I had to meet with a school team to put the wheels in motion to open the shelter but I didn’t know anybody. Fortunately, I was able to tell my secretary the positions of the staff members I needed including the lead custodians, cafeteria manager, administrators, and guidance counselors, and she coordinated that first and important meeting.

As the years progressed I would recall previous experiences, from listening to stories my administrators or professors shared, personal on the job experiences, and experiences as a parent observing my own children’s principals deal with the public, to help me make decisions and handle unexpected situations. After my years as a principal, I worked in district-level leadership development. Today I serve as a mentor to new principals and as an adjunct professor supervising the internship of educational leadership majors.

Educational Leadership preparation programs include an internship, with graduate-level students engaging in leadership experiences under the direction of a school administrator. As a university internship supervisor, I connect with school administrators, visit schools, guide

candidates through the requirements of the internship and learning logs and help students reflect on their experiences. Over the years, students' required experiences have transitioned from management to instructional leadership and from documenting the number of hours engaged in leadership experiences to documenting leadership of instruction.

Standard 8 of the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Program Recognition Standards - Building Level (2018) specifies that candidates participating in effective internships are provided a variety of opportunities in multiple school environments to apply and refine skills under a mentor during a minimum of six months of concentrated (10-15 hours per week) authentic leadership activities within a school setting. I have observed that the learning that takes place throughout the internship experience is dependent on the quality and quantity of leadership opportunities and how actively the candidate is permitted to participate.

Although educational leadership candidates are willing, school-based supervisors may not perceive the candidates as able, and active roles in authentic leadership opportunities may be limited. In addition, substitute teachers often must be hired to permit the candidates who are classroom teachers to leave the walls of the classroom and become fully engaged in the day to day operations of school administration. The cost of substitutes is not just financial, but a loss of a day of learning for candidates' students.

Simulations have been used for training in nursing, the military, and other fields. The most common simulation methods utilize computerized mannequins, role-play, simulated participants, and virtual simulations. Actors playing a role can produce high fidelity simulations (Aebersold, 2018). Gilbert (2017), found that immersive simulation is an effective tool for adult learning, perhaps more so than traditional learning experiences.

The University of Central Florida developed virtual computer-simulated classroom environments in collaboration with computer professionals, teachers, professors, actors, researchers, and digital artists. In mixed reality environments teachers interact with virtual students appearing as avatars on a screen. No special technology is needed other than what is readily available with an Internet connection, camera, and microphone (Dieker, Straub, Hughes, Hynes, and Hardin, 2014).

In 2016, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) announced that it had selected Mursion to provide virtual reality simulation technology for school leaders. Interactive simulations enable school leaders to practice complex interactions they have with teachers, parents, and community members every day. Part of my leadership development work provided me the opportunity to work with Mursion to help develop a scenario based on previous experiences I had as a principal, practice possible responses with an actor, engage with an avatar, and debrief with assistant principals who participated as part of their professional learning.

Waller, Reitz, Poole, Riddell, and Muir (2017) found that challenging simulations in a leadership development setting that present the potential for failure can mimic the stress of real experiences. When leaders were taken out of their comfort zones, their heart rates were raised and their cognitive performance and perceived learning from the experience was improved. The study suggests that if we look beneath surface leadership behaviors to cognitive and neurological processes we may be able to develop innovative methods to accelerate leaders' development and prepare them for challenging environments. I can report that when I interacted with an avatar with others present in the room, a few minutes of elapsed time seemed much longer because of the intensity of the activity.

DeJong and Grundmeyer (2018) report that educational leadership simulations help prepare school leaders by engaging candidates in real-life scenarios they will face in the field without real-world implications and they recommend that licensure programs should consider the use of simulations as instructional tools. According to Dimock (2019), anyone born between 1981 and 1996 (ages 23 to 38 in 2019) is considered a millennial. Growing up relying on technology for communication, connectivity, and entertainment, millennials are moving into school leadership positions. They readily transition between Google forms, data spreadsheets, email, and creating mail-merges to provide feedback to teachers in real time. Harnessing virtual reality technology for millennials should become an integral part of training current and future leaders to practice handling difficult human interactions.

When I was a classroom teacher I was compliant. I never witnessed or engaged in extremely challenging conversations, even during my educational leadership internship. Case studies were used during my internship as tools for learning and they are still in use today. Once I became an assistant principal I had no choice but to learn how to handle these difficult conversations with teachers and parents.

Virtual reality in preparation programs can only serve to enhance the internship experience for future leaders. Engaging in virtual reality simulations in a structured, safe practice setting with opportunities to debrief during educational leadership preparation programs would help future school leaders develop their skills prior to the first day on the job. In addition to enhancing the internship experience, candidates who are not able to leave the classroom for the recommended 10-15 hours per week over a period of six months would still have the opportunity to develop their leadership skills. Teachers know there is a point where we transition from teaching our students from learning to read, to reading to learn. Ensuring virtual reality

simulations are embedded in leadership development programs would ensure all candidates would not just learn to lead, but would practice leading in order to learn. Educational leadership internships that require participation in predetermined rigorous virtual reality simulations would set a standard for performance and ensure graduates would be prepared for jobs in the field regardless of the quality of the school-based internship.

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