

## The Effectiveness of an Embedded Approach to Practicum Experiences in Educational Leadership: Program Candidates' Perspectives

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This study examined how effective an embedded practicum experience in an educational leadership program in a Southeastern University is in serving the purpose of preparing educational leaders to meet future challenges. Findings of this study confirm practicum areas that met the educational demands and highlight areas that need improvement to make the delivery of the leadership program more effective.

In recent years, educational leadership preparation programs in university-based delivery settings have received increased attention and pressure to improve the quality of their programs to meet national standards that reflect effective leadership practices based on research (National Policy Board for Educational Administration [NPBEA], 2005). As a result, the response to this pressure to improve leadership preparation programs has met with some positive as well as negative outcomes. Many states, districts, and outside funding agencies developed new policies and invested resources to improve existing programs. The mandates to redesign Educational Leadership Programs in universities in the State of Georgia resulted in significant changes that were adopted by the educational leadership department of a university to reflect the requirements of the new program. Particularly, there has been a change from the traditional way candidates gain leadership field experiences, often referred to as internships in the literature. No longer are candidates enrolled in one or two discreet courses (i.e., practica) during which time they participate in field experiences supervised by university supervisors and local school mentors. Instead, candidates now learn from their field experiences as a part of the course activities. Field experiences are embedded in each course and are designed to expose students directly to on-the-job-experiences together with course contents. This change places greater effort and emphasis on collaborating with school districts and university faculty in providing meaningful experiences for candidates in leadership preparation programs. The purpose of this study is to investigate how effective the embedded practicum experience in an educational leadership program is in serving the purpose of preparing educational leaders' capacity to meet future challenges. Strengths and weaknesses of the practicum experience would be identified through the perceptions of program candidates. Findings of this study would confirm practicum areas that met the educational demands and highlight areas that would

need improvement to make the delivery of the leadership program more effective.

### Conceptual Framework

The body of professional literature continues to grow with information suggesting ways to improve educational leadership preparation programs. One essential component in this body of research is in developing significant internship/field experiences/practica. We consider internship, field experiences, and practica as interchangeable. Field experiences in educational leadership programs provide the linkage between classroom practice and professional practice (Chance, 1990; Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005; White & Crow, 1993). In addition, activities in practicum experiences should link theory to practice (Cordeiro, & Smith-Sloan, 1995; Daresh, 2002; Williamson & Hudson, 2001). Most programs divide leadership coursework and internship into two separate components (Hackmann & Price, 1995; Hess & Kelly, 2005; Jackson & Kelley, 2002; Milstein & Krueger, 1997). Research indicates that first-year principals with an internship experience were significantly more confident (Cohen, 2001; Jean & Evans, 1995) and performed statistically better at the critical tasks related to the principal's role (Jean & Evans, 1995) than those without an internship experience. In addition, educational leadership candidates considered school-based practicum activities that enabled them to apply new knowledge into practice and received mentoring from practicing administrators as the most highly valued program experiences (Jiang, Patterson, Chandler, & Chan, 2009; Krueger & Milstein, 1995). In contrast, Williamson and Hudson (2001) cautioned that the absence of a linkage between theory and practice could inhibit learning outcomes of aspiring administrators. Daresh (2002) argued that although some leadership preparation programs strived to etch the relationship between theory and practice in candidates' minds, many still shortchanged candidates

due to insufficient program planning and field experience supervision.

The success of field experiences depended very much on the collaboration between the university faculty and school administrators (Hall & Lutz, 1989; Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, & Orr, 2007), particularly a quality school principal (William & Hudson, 2001). Chenoweth, Carr, and Ruhl (2002) noted that key factors in determining practicum success were the quality of mentorship and the time candidates devoted to practicum activities. Bradshaw, Perreault, McDowelle, and Bell (1997) concluded in their study that candidates of full-time extended internship were better prepared for entry-level administrative positions than their part-time counterparts. In contrast, Wilmore and Bratlien (2005) pointed out that very little mentor training and dedication existed in educational leadership programs. Chance (1990) also found that the impact of practica on future administrators was somewhat limited. Gaudreau, Kufel, and Parks (2006), after a review of current literature on field experiences, summarized that “more research targeting effective field-based practices, performance assessments, and strong mentoring” (p. 30) was essential in ensuring the quality internship programs.

With respect to the structure and design of field experiences, research literature suggests that field experiences can best be completed in phases (Cordeiro & Smith-Sloan, 1995; Hall & Lutz, 1989; Pautler, 1991; Restine, 1990). Specifically, Joachim and Klotz (2000) identified areas of educational leadership that needed to be covered in the field experiences including skills in school based management, ability to lead diverse student populations, sensitivity to child development, effectiveness of instructional leaders, capability of establishing a community of learners, and accomplishment in reflective practices. Creighton (2001) recommended that practicum programs focus on what principals would actually do in a given context, rather than what they might do. The Southern Regional Educational Board (Fry, Bottoms, & O’Neill, 2006), based on their regional study of internship programs, made a series of recommendations which included the focus on “essential competencies for leading curriculum, instruction and student achievement” (p. 9) and the establishment of partnerships between university programs and school districts in the design and implementation of a structured internship program. In a recent national study, one of the common features of exemplary leadership preparation programs was identified as “well designed and supervised administrative internships that allow candidates to engage in leadership responsibilities for substantial periods of time under the tutelage of expert veterans” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007, p. 6). Further, this study also found that institutional partnerships appeared to contribute profoundly to the programs’ success.

The research findings indicate a link between practicum experiences and the overall effectiveness of the leadership program. Extensive reviews of research on exemplary programs have identified several common features (Davis et al., 2005; Jackson & Kelley, 2002; McCarthy, 1999; Orr, 2006; Young, Crow, Ogawa, & Murphy, 2009), among which is the importance of a quality internship that provides opportunities to apply leadership knowledge and skills with the support of an expert practitioner/mentor (e.g., Orr & Orphanos, 2010). Furthermore, Orr and Barber (2007) found that more intensive internships resulted in actual career advancement. However, limited studies are found regarding the perceptions of students involving program expectations and satisfaction. One recent study explored the expectations of students in the business, accounting, and economic disciplines to inform course delivery and improve professional development programs for faculties (Handal, Wood, & Muchatuta, 2011). Studies of candidates who actually went through the practicum experiences in leadership preparation programs do not appear to be common. What appears to be missing is the student voice in the design and delivery of an effective leadership program. Therefore, this study attempts to examine the effectiveness of the embedded educational leadership practicum experiences through the perceptions of program candidates.

### **Significance of the Study**

The embedded practicum design is intended to bring a realistic insight and a revolutionary vigor to what practicum experiences really need to be. The findings of this study revealed the extent of effectiveness of the embedded approach to practicum activities by examining the goals, the implementation, and the outcomes of the program. Recommendations were made to the entire educational leadership faculty as to the directions the program should pursue for continuous improvement of offerings in meaningful and effective education leadership practicum experiences. The results of this study would certainly advance teaching and learning in educational leadership programs. Other higher education programs will also benefit from our experiences in assessing what is achieved as a result of our redesign effort.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do educational leadership program candidates perceive the effectiveness of their learning experiences in the embedded practicum activities?
2. How do educational leadership program candidates perceive the effectiveness of their

practicum learning experiences relating to the six ELCC standards?

3. Do candidates' gender, ethnicity, teaching experiences, degree earned, and school level make any difference in their perception of the embedded activities in the educational leadership program?

### Methodology

#### Research Design

The study is designed to take both quantitative and qualitative approaches. "Considering the breadth and magnitude of much of educational research, it is not surprising that a single study may require mixed methods" (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005, p. 277). Educational leadership candidates in this study were surveyed to solicit their perceptions of the effectiveness of the embedded practicum experiences (see Appendix). Follow-up interviews were arranged with voluntary candidates to secure a more holistic picture of the quality of embedded practicum experiences. The use of a mixed methodology would help researchers gain a deeper understanding of the practicum issues through a triangulation approach of quantitative and qualitative data.

#### Participants

Two cohorts of 31 EDL candidates who started in the fall semester of 2008 with the newly embedded practicum experiences were the participants of this study. All cohort candidates participated in the quantitative survey. A voluntary group of 15 candidates participated in the focus group interviews.

#### Research Instrument

A researcher-designed survey instrument based on the Educational Leadership Constituent Council Standards (ELCC) solicited candidates' perceptions of their practicum experience (see Appendix). The first part of the survey called for demographic information regarding the survey participants. The next 16 items were related to participants' perceptions of the extent to which they agree with the effectiveness of practicum activities. These 16 items were classified into six categories for analysis: course requirements, quality of assignments, assistance to candidates, reflections to journals, practical opportunities, and compliance with ELCC standards. The last part in the survey consisted of seven open-ended questions to solicit qualitative comments from the participants relating to their practicum experiences. A panel of judges consisting of three graduate professors, three school principals, and

three program candidates professionally examined the instrument. The panel reviewed the substantiality of the contents, the suitability of the format, and the appropriateness of the language used in the instrument. All constructive recommendations from the judges were evaluated and incorporated in revising the instrument. The revised instrument was then pilot-tested for internal inconsistency by total response and by theme with an overall reliability  $\alpha = .929$ .

Open-ended questions were also developed for discussion with program candidates during the focus group interviews. The questions were focused on the strengths and weaknesses of the program, the supervisors' and mentors' roles, and meaningful activities and ways to improve the embedded practicum experiences. Answers to these questions generated more in-depth information regarding the candidates' perspectives of the new program with embedded practicum.

#### Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed by descriptive statistics: percentages, means and standard deviations to examine program candidates' perception of different aspects of practicum experiences. Their responses to each of the six ELCC standards were compared by using ANOVA to determine if significant difference existed. All participants' responses were analyzed by ANOVA to determine if gender, ethnicity, teaching experiences, degree earned, and school level make any difference in the perceptions of their practicum experiences. In this study, qualitative data of candidates were categorized into seven major themes as indicated by the open-ended questions. Data from interviews were analyzed by themes that emerged from the responses coded by the researchers. Themes and patterns of these responses were closely observed and professionally recorded.

### Findings

#### Demographic Information

Thirty-one practicum candidates responded to the survey with most of them male (58.6%), Caucasian (73.3%), and with bachelor's degrees (93.4%). Eighty-seven percent of them were classroom teachers with over half of them (58.1%) in elementary schools. Over half of the candidates (51.6%) were in their first five years of teaching, and 80.6% had no school leadership experience. Most candidates said their career goals were to become educational leaders at the school level (48.4%) or at the district level (16.1%). See Table 1 for demographic statistics of the practicum candidates.

Table 1  
*Demographic Statistics – Practicum Candidates by Percentages*

Demographic	Category	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	58.6
	Female	41.4
Ethnicity	Caucasian	73.3
	African American	16.8
	Hispanic	3.3
	Asian American	3.3
	Native American	3.3
Position	Teacher	87.1
	Assistant principal	3.2
	Principal	0.0
	Administrative assistant	3.2
	Department chair	0.0
	ILT/ALT	0.0
	District position	6.5
	Other	0.0
	Degree earned	BA/BS
	MEd	3.3
	EdS	3.3
School level	Elementary	58.1
	Middle	25.8
	High	16.1
Years of Pre-K-12 leadership	0	80.6
	< 1	3.3
	1-5	12.8
	6-10	3.3
Years teaching	1-5	51.6
	6-10	19.4
	11-15	22.6
	16-20	6.5
Career goal	Teacher leader	16.1
	School leader	48.4
	District leader	16.1
	Undecided	16.1
	Other	3.3

### Results of Quantitative Analysis

Candidates' responses to all the 16 items in the survey were analyzed by descriptive statistics (see Table 2). Results of the analysis indicated that candidates responded the most effectively on three items: item 12 (ELCC Standard 2), item 11 (ELCC Standard 1), and item 1 (course requirements) were rated,  $M = 4.00$  ( $SD = .77$ ),  $M = 3.90$  ( $SD = .79$ ), and  $M = 3.81$  ( $SD = .87$ ), respectively. The three items receiving the least effective rating were Item 2 (school culture),  $M = 3.10$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ; Item 6 (support to candidates),  $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ; and Item 8 (opportunities to candidates),  $M = 2.87$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ . The mean of all the responses to all the items was 3.51 ( $SD = .61$ ).

All of the 16 items to which candidates responded were organized under six practicum themes of interest: course requirements, quality of assignments, assistance to candidates, reflections to journals, practical opportunities, and compliance with ELCC standards. Descriptive statistics of candidates' responses are shown in Table 3. All of the mean scores indicate that the responses were above average. Candidates' responses showed that course requirements and quality of assignments were rated high ( $M = 3.81$  and  $M = 3.66$  respectively) whereas reflections to journals ( $M = 3.37$ ) and practical opportunities ( $M = 3.05$ ) were rated low.

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to examine if significant differences in the perceptions of practicum experiences existed among the candidates' responses to the six ELCC standards. Results of the

Table 2  
*Descriptive Statistics – Practicum Candidates’ Responses by Survey Item*

Item	<i>N</i>	Minimum	Maximum	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	31	2.00	5.00	3.81	.87
2	31	1.00	5.00	3.10	1.11
3	31	1.00	5.00	3.71	1.07
4	31	1.00	5.00	3.61	1.09
5	31	1.00	5.00	3.29	1.01
6	30	1.00	5.00	3.13	1.14
7	30	1.00	5.00	3.23	1.41
8	31	1.00	5.00	2.87	1.23
9	29	1.00	5.00	3.52	1.21
10	31	1.00	5.00	3.65	.84
11	31	3.00	5.00	3.90	.79
12	31	3.00	5.00	4.00	.77
13	31	2.00	5.00	3.68	.79
14	31	1.00	5.00	3.48	.96
15	27	1.00	5.00	3.22	1.12
16	27	1.00	5.00	3.44	.97
All	31	2.50	4.81	3.51	.61

Table 3  
*Descriptive Statistics – Practicum Candidates’ Responses by Theme*

Item	<i>N</i>	Minimum	Maximum	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Course requirements	31	2.00	5.00	3.81	.87
Quality of assignments	31	1.00	5.00	3.66	1.02
Assistance to candidates	28	1.67	5.00	3.39	.86
Reflections to journals	31	1.00	5.00	3.37	.85
Practical opportunities	30	1.00	5.00	3.05	1.21
Compliance with ELCC standards	25	2.50	5.00	3.58	.73

analysis indicated significant differences among the candidates’ perceptions of their practicum activities relating to the six ELCC standards,  $F = 3.11$ ,  $df = 5$ ,  $MS = 2.54$ ,  $p = .01$  (see Table 4). A follow-up Tukey post hoc test was performed to locate where the significant differences were. Results of the post hoc test indicated significant differences in two comparisons. ELCC Standard 1 (vision) was rated significantly higher than Standard 5 (ethics) with a mean difference of .681. ELCC Standard 2 (school culture) was also rated significantly higher than Standard 5 (ethics) with a mean difference of .778 (see Table 5). Both comparisons were significant ( $p = .05$ ).

One-way ANOVA was used to examine if gender, ethnicity, teaching experiences, degree earned, and school level made any difference in the participants’ perceptions of practicum experiences. Results of the analyses indicated that no significant difference was found in the comparisons of all the classifications of gender, ethnicity, leadership experiences, degrees earned, and school level in all the candidates’ responses.

### Results of Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data in this study were collected from the candidates’ responses to the seven open-ended questions at the end of the quantitative survey. Significant sources of data were also retrieved from information provided by voluntary candidates participating in the focus group interviews. The qualitative data were carefully reviewed. Results of qualitative data analysis are presented in the following paragraphs according to the qualitative questions raised.

An analysis of candidates’ responses to the seven open-ended questions and the interview questions are provided below.

**Strengths of the current embedded practicum structure.** Participating candidates liked the embedded practicum activities. In this approach, more time can be employed in covering other essential areas of educational leadership. As one candidate put it, “I do like how the assignments all rolled into what our field experience was. We did not have to do additional administrative busy work to make our hours.”

Table 4  
*Analysis of Variance – Comparison of Candidates’ Responses to ELCC Standards*

Item		SS	df	MS	F
Standards	Between groups	12.71	5	2.54	3.11**
	Within groups	140.56	172	.82	
	Total	153.27	177		

Note. \*\*  $p = .01$

Table 5  
*Post Hoc Tests (Tukey HSD) – ELCC Standards Comparisons of Means*

(I) ELCC Standards	(J) ELCC Standards	Mean Difference (I-J)	SE	Sig.
1	2	-.097	.230	.998
1	3	.226	.230	.923
1	4	.419	.230	.452
1	5	.681*	.238	.050
1	6	.459	.238	.389
2	3	.323	.230	.724
2	4	.516	.230	.222
2	5	.778*	.238	.016
2	6	.556	.238	.186
3	4	.194	.230	.959
3	5	.455	.238	.398
3	6	.233	.238	.924
4	5	.262	.238	.881
4	6	.039	.238	1.000
5	6	-.222	.246	.945

Note. \*  $p =$  or  $< .05$ . ELCC Standard 1 = school vision; ELCC Standard 2 = school culture; ELCC Standard 3 = resources; ELCC Standard 4 = school community relations; ELCC Standard 5 = ethics; ELCC Standard 6 = larger community context.

Candidates in general complimented on the quality and practicability of the practicum assignments. Some representative comments by candidates are selected in the following: “Practicum experience allows us to reflect on the connection between what’s been assigned and is practical application as future administrators”; “There is no lapse time between theoretical learning and application”; “Practicum assignments throughout the graduate program were extremely meaningful, relevant and practical”; and,

It was very hands on, with practical things that I can take to the classroom today, even though I’m not currently an administrator. It explains some of the inner workings of the school and why some things happen like they do.

**Weaknesses of the current embedded practicum structure.** The main weaknesses of the current embedded practicum activities identified by the participating candidates included the following:

1. Candidates commented on lack of communication as follows: “Students and

mentors should be in dialogue with KSU/PSC/DOE about how to improve practicum activities”; and, “School/school system seemed to have little/no involvement in developing my leadership skills.”

2. Candidates reflected that they were not provided enough opportunities for practical experiences in the following: “Not enough hands on experiences or opportunities for leadership activities”; “Did not have opportunities to observe administrative duties”; “Minimum actual educational leadership participating activities are planned. Most practicum work were observation”; and, “Not enough opportunities for performing actual administrative duties.”
3. Candidates voiced repeatedly the redundancy of curriculum contents as cited in the following paragraphs: “I just think maybe these last three classes were too much staff development at one time. It seemed monotonous, like we are teaching the same things”; and,

For all three classes, we are basing all our projects on professional development, so it’s almost

redundant. Whether it is two years or one and a half years, like ours is, you still remember and it's kind of like, Why are we doing this again?

4. Candidates claimed that there were few or no feedback from college instructors about their practicum assignments. Two of their expressions are cited as follows: "Students didn't get any feedback from their practicum assignments"; and, "We were turning in lengthy, very time-consuming projects, and we were receiving very little feedback on them. And I don't want this program to be one that simply turns in our work and get an A."

Other practicum weaknesses presented by candidates also included difficulties in logging-in practicum hours, scheduling for assignment turn-in, and program area coverage deficiency. In their own words, they stated in the following:

It is hard to log-in hours for practicum projects. It's hard to do it as you're going along but it's even harder to go back. I wish there was just some way of having it to where the [pause], because the assignments are built around what you're doing. . . . Just the completed assignments themselves could prove that you put the hours in.

The only thing I really have problems with is all projects being done in all the classes at the end of the semester. I know most of them are supposed to be cumulative assignments to build upon throughout the semester, but everything due at the same time, and the amount of stuff that's due at the same time seem to, at the end of the semester, be very overwhelming at times.

In a few courses, I felt like we didn't get what we were supposed to from the syllabus or from the curriculum that we were asked to learn. So, because of that, there are a few areas where I'm a little nervous about.

**Importance of the role of a university instructor in this practicum experience.** In response to this question, most of the participating candidates perceived the role of the university instructor as very important because they guided the overall practicum experience. Here is what they had to say: "The instructor supplied support and knowledge when gaps showed in the field experiences"; "The university instructors design the assignments that allow for the students to get into their principals' thoughts and ideas"; and, "The instructor is the determining factor to determine the effectiveness of the future school leader."

University instructors were also perceived by candidates as ones who monitored the progress of practicum experiences as follows: "Monitoring. If we got the work done, they knew we had done the field experience. Most of it, if not all of it, couldn't be made up"; and, "It was the assignments university instructors gave. It was a little bit scary. But it ended up being more scary than it actually started. Instructors checking completed work against the standards."

Most of the instructors were described by the candidates as helpful and supportive as seen in the following passages: "We have been able to get hold of most of the instructors and figure out what we're supposed to be doing and making sure we're on the right track"; "Every one of them have been flexible and understanding, and supportive in that way"; and, "I've pretty much felt if we had concerns, the professors listened to us."

**Importance of the role of a school mentor in this practicum experience.** The majority of participating candidates considered the school mentors as very important. Here is what they said: "The experience for the mentee lies in the mentor's hand"; "I used all of my administrators based on their strengths"; and, "Extremely important—need to get information for the assignments."

The candidates emphasized the important role of mentors being the providers of the most current information that is being practiced in the field. They verified this by saying: "My mentor has provided a wealth of knowledge to me regarding our assignments"; "Has sat through countless interviews, has answered every question, has provided everything to the point now where after everything by this semester, I feel bad even going to ask her for anything else, even though she's been helpful"; "She shared a lot with me when I did interviews with her, the mistakes she made her first year of being an assistant principal and the fact that she thought she knew it all and she really didn't"; and,

I do feel that my mentor has been very responsive to the things I need or the things I'm asking. He would ask for any project be done and be applicable to the school. Because of that, everything I've done for graduate school has been so widely used and so helpful here at my school.

Candidates did complain that a few mentors were inaccessible and did not understand what they were practicing at school. The following quotations represent what they said: "It is very hard to find time to get together with him";

Every time when working with projects, I am the one going to him instead he coming to me. If I don't bring up, nothing will happen. I completed

my assignments more with help of my teacher colleagues than the mentor.

And,

I think because of being a new program and me being the first one, I don't know necessarily if the role of a mentor was defined to her. I may be able to ask her, but I don't know if she'd be able to answer it, honestly.

**Most meaningful practicum activities.** The participating candidates' responses indicated that the most meaningful experiences were the practicum activities that reflect the real situations in their schools. The following activities were highlighted as most meaningful.

**GAP analysis.** One student noted,

The very first semester and us doing the GAP analysis for the theory class. That pretty much was eye-opener to kick off the program. That's one of the assignments that I still remember doing that I said if I'm a principal, this is what my school is going to be evaluated on and I do need to know what to look for.

**Instructional assessment.** One student explained,

The curriculum instruction and assessment class, we had to do in-depth interviews with teachers and find out where they're coming from. . . . It was an extremely long process and project. That was really meaningful because I got to see what other teachers were thinking.

**School culture analysis.** One student said,

First semester, we did the school culture analysis. Coming from a school where the culture is questionable, to somebody that's look in, it was very helpful to interview teachers just off the cuff, tell me what you think, this is between me and the four walls and you.

**Class observation.** A student explained,

It was neat to go and have the opportunity to observe and then with your project as well, going and observing and playing pretend, that we are the leaders and what would we do to pre-conference and post-conference.

**Suggestions to improve the embedded practicum experience.** With respect to suggestions to improve the embedded practicum experience, the

participating candidates suggested the following ways. This was growing out of their recent embedded experiences, which in their opinion could be improved.

1. Designate mentors and provide coaching training.
2. Increased collaboration between university instructors and mentors.
3. The university needs to drive/influence the schools based on candidates' practicum experiences.
4. Instructors need to put their time to complete their review of field log reflections.
5. Need more shadowing administrator experiences.
6. Visit other schools with different demographics to provide cases for comparison.

### Answers to Research Questions

Regarding the first research question ("How do educational leadership program candidates perceive the effectiveness of their learning experiences in the embedded practicum activities?"), participating program candidates perceived real school experiences to be most meaningful. In supporting the embedded practicum activities, they gave it an above average rating. They particularly liked the course requirements and the quality of assignments in the program. At the same time, they also identified the ineffectiveness of the program in providing candidates with feedback to field activity logs and opportunities for hand-on experiences. Candidates' opinions of the effectiveness of the embedded practicum activities were reflected in their quantitative and qualitative responses.

Candidates also recommended other areas of improvement to include increased communication between university instructors and school mentors, coaching training of mentors, administrator shadowing experiences, and visits to other diverse schools.

Regarding the second research question ("How do educational leadership program candidates perceive the effectiveness of their practicum learning experiences relating to the six ELCC standards?"), of the six ELCC standards, candidates perceived Standard 1 (vision) and Standard 2 (school culture) to be the standards most effectively achieved by all the well planned practicum projects. Candidates considered the practicum activities to be the least effective in fulfilling the requirements of Standard 5 (ethics).

Regarding the third research question ("Do candidates' gender, ethnicity, teaching experiences, degree earned, and school level make any difference in their perception of the embedded activities in the educational leadership program?"), results of the quantitative data analyses indicated that no significant



difference was found in the perceptions of embedded practicum experiences among all the classifications of gender, ethnicity, teaching experiences, degree earned, and school level of candidates.

### Discussion

The findings of this study identified embedded practicum areas that meet the educational demands of candidates while highlighting practicum areas that need improvement. The study contributes to the knowledge base of the field by drawing upon both quantitative and qualitative feedback from program candidates to evaluate and improve the practicum experience in the educational leadership program. Program candidates are in the best position to discuss their recent experiences of exposure to the real world of school leadership. Responses from candidates regarding leadership practicum experiences are valuable to program developers in their future program redesign effort. The following observations of candidates' responses deserve further discussion:

First, the purpose of this study to solicit candidates' perceptions of program effectiveness is in line with the same beliefs in the studies performed by Crews and Weakley (1995); Lovette (1977); and Van Berkum, Richardson, and Lane (1994). All of us trust that program candidates would provide us with the honest feedback for program improvement.

Second, findings of this study indicated an ineffective involvement of program candidates in practicum experiences of ethics. Program designers need to seek research findings from Lee and Keiffer (2003) who strongly believed in fostering the development of appropriate leadership dispositions.

Third, one of the candidates' ideas for practicum improvement was to promote communications between university instructors and school mentors. This is in agreement with the same position promoted by mainstream scholars (Hall & Lutz, 1989; Peel & Wallace, 1996; Thompson & Björk, 1989; Williams, 1987; Williamson & Hudson, 2001).

Fourth, another suggestion made by program candidates was to identify practicum mentors for coaching training. This is reflecting the same idea as advocated by Wilmore and Bratlien (2005) who pointed out the need for mentor training and dedication to get them prepared for mentoring/coaching colleagues in a leadership practicum.

Fifth, understanding that full time educational administrative internship in Georgia is not an option, educational leadership candidates must earn practicum hours outside their regular responsibilities in school to fulfill the practicum requirements. In such situations, even though candidates tried fervently to meet expectations, because of state and school board

policies, many hands-on administrative activities could not be satisfactorily implemented. In many instances, candidates' practicum experiences are limited to only observations, rather than direct involvement in real and meaningful school leadership activities.

### Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made to offer opportunities for improvement of practicum experiences in educational leadership program:

1. It is recommended that all the practicum stakeholders, instructors, mentors, and candidate representatives meet at the start of the program to discuss the requirements of the embedded practicum experiences and the roles and responsibilities of all the parties.
2. It is recommended that communication between instructors and mentors be strengthened. A mechanism has to be built in to this entire delivery process of practicum experiences and should serve as a channel of close contact to keep all parties updated of what is going on.
3. It is recommended that the instructors share the list of practicum activities with the mentors in the initial phase of the program to make them aware of expectations and to seek their advice. Practicum activities need to be revised to suit the needs of individual candidates.
4. It is recommended that all program course syllabi be revisited to scan for any possible redundancy of practicum activities and revised to avoid any duplication of practicum experiences.

### Conclusion

When the embedded practicum experiences in the educational leadership program were first designed in this university, the designers had two notions in mind: (1) embedded practicum experiences will free up needed hours for other essential areas of leadership instruction; and (2) embedded practicum experiences will allow candidates immediate field learning experiences to reflect what they learn in class. After implementation of all the practicum activities for a one cohort cycle, program designers have sufficient evidence to indicate that the original purposes of the embedded practicum have been achieved. However, the completion of this pioneer cohort also disclosed facts that communication relating to practicum experiences between the schools and the universities is seriously lacking. In addition, school mentors need to be involved

in determining the types of practicum activities most beneficial to candidates. Consideration of candidates' particular needs will allow flexibility to improve the quality of educational leadership programs and positively influence the leadership capacity of candidates in the preparation programs. Findings from this study can be applied to other disciplines requiring field-based experiences, such as teacher leadership preparation programs, business internship experiences, and service fields such as nursing and school psychologist preparation programs.

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Appendix  
MEd in Educational Leadership – Perception of Practicum Experiences

**Survey of Program Candidates**

**Section I. Demographics:** Please complete the following items by filling in the blanks or checking one of the choices provided.

School: \_\_\_\_\_ School district: \_\_\_\_\_

Your KSU supervisor: \_\_\_\_\_ Your school mentor: \_\_\_\_\_

Current position:  Teacher  Principal  Assistant Principal  
 Administrative Assistant  Dept. Chair  ILT/ALT  
 District Office Position  Other Position

Educational Leadership Program you are enrolled in:

MEd Program  Add-on Program  MEd (Technology Leadership)

Years in P-12 leadership position:  0  Less than 1  1-5  6-10

Years as Classroom Teacher:  1-5  6-10  11-15  16-20  over 20

Highest Degree Earned:  BA/BS  Med  EdS  EdD/PhD

Gender:  Male  Female

Ethnicity:  Caucasian (Non-Hispanic)  African American  Hispanic  
 Asian American  Native American  Other

Career Goal:  Classroom Teacher  School Leadership Positions  Undecided  
 Others \_\_\_\_\_  District Leadership Positions

**Section II. Guidance and Support from the KSU Supervisor and Field Mentor:** Please rate the following statements by choosing from 1 to 5 (1 = *least adequate*, 2 = *less adequate*, 3 = *adequate*, 4 = *more adequate*, 5 = *most adequate*).

1	Clear guidance was provided to me regarding the requirements of the course.	1	2	3	4	5
2	Feedback was provided to my reflective journals on a regular basis.	1	2	3	4	5
3	I was assigned a variety of duties to perform in their practicum experience.	1	2	3	4	5
4	I was assigned meaningful work to do in their practicum experience.	1	2	3	4	5
5	Supervision was provided to me in each of the practicum tasks assigned to them.	1	2	3	4	5
6	Support was provided to me in performing their assigned administrative duties.	1	2	3	4	5
7	Opportunities were provided for me to observe school administrators at work.	1	2	3	4	5

8	Opportunities were provided for me to participate in hands-on administrative work.	1	2	3	4	5
19	Arrangements were made to allow me to complete all the designated leadership activities.	1	2	3	4	5
10	Directions were provided for me to write required reflections based on my experiences.	1	2	3	4	5
11	My practicum experience relating to ELCC Standard 1 (Vision) was . . .	1	2	3	4	5
12	My practicum experience relating to ELCC Standard 2 (School Culture) was . . .	1	2	3	4	5
13	My practicum experience relating to ELCC Standard 3 (Management) was . . .	1	2	3	4	5
14	My practicum experience relating to ELCC Standard 4 (Community Relations) was . . .	1	2	3	4	5
15	My practicum experience relating to ELCC Standard 5 (Ethics) was . . .	1	2	3	4	5
16	My practicum experience relating to ELCC Standard 6 (Legal, social and Political aspects of education) was . . .	1	2	3	4	5

### Section III: Comments of Practicum Experiences

1. What are the strengths of the current practicum course structure? Please explain.
  
2. What are the weaknesses of the current practicum course structure? Please explain.
  
3. How important is the role of a KSU supervisor in this practicum experiences?
  
4. How important is the role of a school mentor in this practicum experiences?
  
5. What practicum activity/activities do you perceive to be most meaningful? Please explain.
  
6. What suggestions do you have to improve the practicum experience?
  
7. Additional comments