Online Preparation Of Adult Learners In Post-Secondary Education: A Triangulated Study

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ABSTRACT

In this study, data from pre-service school administrators, faculty, and online documents were used to: 1) analyze how pre-service school administrators perceive the online preparation process, 2) analyze how faculty perceive the online preparation of school administrators, and 3) determine the extent to which quality administrators are prepared through the online process. The result of the study yielded strong evidence that the online process is a strong pedagogical tool for preparing quality school administrators for P-12 schools in this era of educational quality and accountability. Perceptions of the participants in this study toward the online process were extremely positive.

Keywords: Online Preparation of Adult Learners, Preparation of School Administrators, Online Learning Quality

INTRODUCTION

Online teaching and learning is rapidly becoming a viable pedagogical tool in most teacher education institutions. Mehhlinger and Power (2002) concluded that most schools of education incorporate distance learning technologies for three basic reasons – to reach new school administrators in rural areas, to provide educational opportunities to diverse prospective students, and to integrate technology in the program. Niederhauser, Salem, and Fields (1999) stated that a common problem in schools of education is helping prospective school administrators master content subjects. Preparing quality school administrators is an important educational issue among policy makers, educational leaders, schools of education, and others with interest in improving the quality of school principals. A major goal of most institutions is to produce quality administrators that can provide quality instructional leadership from a pedagogical perspective.

States such as North Carolina, Texas, California, and other high growth states are experiencing deep shortages of school administrators. These states have legislated some ways to alleviate the shortage through emergency recall of retired school administrators and hiring school administrators with degrees from online universities. There is a need for research focus on the preparation of quality school administrators through the online process.

There is a growing concern that the decline in quality of public schools, in terms of student achievement, is attributed to lack of quality administrators (Gregorian, 2001). Richardson (1996) emphasized that pre-service administrators' beliefs drive instructional pedagogy. Hart (2002) concluded that pre-service administrators' perceptions should be taken into consideration in an effort to change practices. Research has concluded that students exposed to high quality instruction learn more than others (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). Quality administrators will provide effective leadership for quality instruction. Given these critical issues of concern, and given the importance of preparing quality school administrators for our public schools, research addressing the educational efficacy of online preparation of pre-service administrators has important implications for improving the educational process. The focuses of this study were to: 1) analyze how

pre-service administrators perceive the online preparation process, 2) analyze how faculty perceive the online school administration preparation process, and 3) determine the extent to which quality administrators are prepared through the online learning process.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

The high-stakes accountability environment and the federal "No Child Left Behind Act" of 2002 have placed enormous pressure on schools and school districts to put quality school administrators in low-performing schools (NCLB, 2002). Research addressing the preparation of quality school administrators has deep roots within the general education literature (Darling-Hammon & Youngs, 2002, Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000), as well as within the school leadership literature (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Nye et…al, 2004, Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). According to both strands, preparation of quality administrators is a process rather than an event. It is a process because the preparation of school administrators involves sequential stages. To capture some of these sequential stages, this research study is based on a theoretical model for distance learning adapted from Mehlinger and Powers (2002). According to this model, preparation of quality administrators through the online process involves three separate but related phases. This model illustrates the importance of the decision to enroll in an online course (Phase 1), as well as the acquisition of conceptual skills through an identified self-regulated learning process (Phase 2). The model also depicts content and pedagogical content knowledge acquisition (Phase 3) through graded assessments. By using this model as a framework, the researchers were able to explore and pinpoint the educational efficacy of online school administrators' preparation process.

Mehlinger and Powers (2002) concluded that technology and distance learning can be used as tools to enhance the preparation of school administrators. Mory, Gambill, and Browning (1998) emphasized that when online courses are carefully designed and implemented, that students learn and thrive academically. Bishop, Giles and Bryant (2005) concluded that highly interactive and well designed online courses have the advantage of leading to self-directed learning and practice. Zimmerman (1998) emphasized that content knowledge is best acquired when students utilize a self-regulated learning method.

METHOD

Participants

The sampling frame for this study consists of 92 pre-service school administrators from randomly selected online Master of School Administration (MSA) courses and five online faculty members. All the pre-service administrators were online students in a doctorate degree granting Historically Black University in the Southeastern United States. The majority of the student participants were females (63.0%) and African Americans (66.0%). Sixty-four (64.0%) of the student participants were older than 29 years of age. Seventy-one percent (71.0%) of participants were classroom teachers, nine percent (9.0%) were assistant principals, and twenty percent (20.0%) were full-time students. The demographic data showed that 20 percent of the students live within 35 miles of the university where the online courses were offered, 45 percent live more than 55 miles away from the university, and 35 percent live more than 65 miles away from the university. The demographic characteristics of student participants are presented in Table 1.

Instrument

Johnson and Christensen (2004) emphasized that the use of multiple perspectives strengthens educational research as it adds insight and understanding. Denzi (1978) identified the use of different types of measure as a good methodological triangulation. Online preparation of school administrators is an important educational issue, and it is equally important to understand the process from both subjective and objective lenses. In this study, the researchers employed a triangulated approach by using both qualitative and quantitative survey questionnaires and document analyses to explore the perceptions of pre-service school administrators and faculty on online preparation of quality school administrators. The goal of such methodology is to provide stronger evidence for a conclusion through convergence and corroboration of findings (Creswell, 2003; Johnson & Christenson, 2004; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). The researchers developed the Online Administrator Preparation

Survey (OAPS) for the study. The OAPS survey was designed using Zimmerman's (1998) work on self-regulated learning. Several items on the survey were also adapted from Ramirez and Owens' (1991) Study Skills' Self Efficacy survey and from literature. A 20-item survey was developed, which included both open- and closed-ended items. Items were grouped into categories to correspond with the three phases of the research model.

Table 1: Pre-service School Administrators' Demographic Data (n = 92)

Variables	No	%
Age		
Less than 28	34	36.0
More than 29	59	64.0
Current Position		
Classroom Teachers	38	41.0
Teacher's Assistant	24	26.0
Full-time Students	19	21.0
Others	11	12.0
Distance from Home to University		
Within 35 miles	18	20.0
About 55 miles Away	41	45.0
More than 65 miles Away	32	35.0
Gender		
Male	34	37.0
Female	58	63.0
Ethnicity		
African-Americans	61	66.0
Caucasian-Americans	31	34.0
Online Course Experience		
First Online Class	51	55.0
Two or More Online Experience	41	45.0

Phase 1 included items that were used to measure participants' reasons for enrolling in online courses, perceived quality of the online process, perceived value of online learning, and overall satisfaction with the online learning process. Each of the items in this category were rated on a 5-point scale anchored by adjectives ranging from "strongly disagree" = 1 to "strongly agree" = 5. Ratings on each item were afforded unit weight and summed to form a composite score with higher scores representing higher perception than lower scores. Phase 2 included items to measure participants' use of self-regulated learning strategies. A 5-point Likert summated rating scale with only the end points, labeled from "1" = not at all typical of me to "5" = very typical of me, were utilized. Participants with reported higher ratings on the self-regulated learning strategies possess higher cognitive/analytical skills (Zimmerman, 1998). Three open-ended questions were included in the survey; two were specific to the quality of the online learning process, and the other to the discussion thread. One open-ended item included suggestions for improving the quality of the online preparation process. A faculty interview followed a 5-item standardized interview protocol.

Procedure

The procedure used in this study reflects a triangulated approach to research consisting of multiple methods of data collection. Data were gathered from pre-service administrators, faculty, and document analysis. Prior to starting the research, the participants were informed about the study and were required to give their permission by signing an informed consent document posted online. They were surveyed toward the middle of the semester and interviews were conducted with faculty at the end of the semester. Two graduate students, trained in interview techniques using a protocol consisting of five standardized questions, interviewed faculty members individually. The students took notes, independently transcribed their notes, and their results were reviewed by the researchers for themes. In addition to interview and survey data, the researchers also analyzed online course syllabi, course content, and course assessment data. Information from these documents provided strong evidence of pedagogical innovations and quality teaching and learning. The researchers were granted access to online courses by the online instructors. The participants in this study completed all the tasks for the study.

RESULTS

In this study, a triangulated approach was used to analyze the perceptions of pre-service school administrators and faculty on online preparation of school administrators. Both quantitative findings from surveys, as well as qualitative findings from the narratives added to the interviews with the participants, are presented here. Pre-service administrators in this study voiced a widespread of agreement with the belief statement that online process is a good medium to prepare quality administrators. About 82 percent of the pre-service participants reported possessing higher cognitive/analytical skills and about 94 percent supported the use of online for additional courses in their pre-service training. The participants indicated that convenience was the most important motive for taking an online course (Table 2). Qualitatively, all the participants overwhelmingly indicated that quality administrators can be prepared through the online process and highlighted some points on the overall quality of the online teaching and learning process. Some remarked that the online process is a better medium to prepare administrators. The result of the faculty interview collaborates with the findings from the pre-service participants that quality administrators can be prepared through the online process. One faculty member voiced strong reservation with regard to year-long internship requirements for online school administrators. The findings from the document analysis of online assessment data revealed that 75 percent of the students were performing at a target level, while 21 percent were at an acceptable level, which was an indication of content and pedagogical content knowledge mastery. This finding also supports the survey results which showed that the students possessed a high level of self-directed learning strategies.

Table 2: Qualitative Themes on Motive for Online Preparation (n = 92)

Themes	Rate (%)
Convenience	83.2
Preferred Learning Mode	74.8
Cost	67.3
Other	52.9

CONCLUSION

Basic to the hot debate on the quality of schools and school administrators is the question of how pre-service administrators are prepared. The relationship between the preparation of administrators and their effectiveness is critical in improving student achievement. A quality school administration program plays a critical role in preparing quality school administrators.

The online process appears to be a strong pedagogical tool for preparing quality administrators for P-12 schools. The pre-service participants in this study engaged in self-directed learning and possessed a high level of self motivational skills. The majority of the student participants indicated that they worked outside their home with other family responsibilities. The perceptions of the participants in this study toward the online process were extremely positive.

The use of a triangulated approach in this study yielded inclusive and useful findings. The qualitative results from this study complemented the quantitative findings that quality administrators are prepared through the online process. The results from this study will not only provide needed information for online education, but also to higher education administrators on ways to optimize the effectiveness of online teaching. The findings also provide strong evidence that research on the delivery of online courses for school administrators must continue in this era of the proliferation of online teaching and learning.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Dr. Comfort Okpala is an Associate Professor in the Department of Human Development and Services. Dr. Okpala has a variety of educational publications in key educational journals like the *Journal of Early Childhood, Journal of Education Finance, Journal of Educational Researcher*, *Urban Education*, *Journal of Applied Business, Journal of Negro Education, Journal of College Teaching and Learning Journal, and Contemporary Issues in Education*

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Dr. Linda Hopson is an Associate Professor in the Department of Human Development and Services at North Carolina A & T State University where she provides leadership and facilitates learning for candidates in the Masters in School Administration program. She has presented at the local, state, and national levels, and has published in a number of educational journals like *Journal of College Teaching and Learning Journal, Journal of Instructional Psychology, and Contemporary Issues in Education Research* and others.

Dr. Edward Fort's experiences as a classroom teacher, Building Administrator, University Chancellor at two higher education institutions and School Superintendent in two different urban school districts have equipped him to specialize in Urban School Administration. He is the Chancellor Emeritus of North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University where he serves as the Endowed Edward B. Fort Professor of Education. For eighteen years, he was the Chancellor of this distinguished institution. Dr. Fort received his doctorate from UC-Berkeley and has written and consulted widely on multiculturalism, leadership and policy formulations impacting urban school districts and universities.

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