

Promising Practices for Leadership Development: Exploring a Collaborative Professional Learning and Coaching Program

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Article abstract

Given the substantial impact school leaders have on school improvement, the imperative for continuous professional learning for leaders is evident. In this two-year action research study, researchers collaborated with a school division, forming a research-practice partnership, to design and explore a collaborative professional learning and coaching program. The primary objective of this program was to align with local leadership standards and foster leadership development. The central research question was: How does implementation of a collaborative professional learning and coaching program contribute to leadership development? Data were collected from district and school leaders and included pre and post surveys, interviews, and focus groups. The findings of this study indicate that district leadership practices show promising potential in fostering inservice opportunities for leadership development. These practices include the following: (a) ensure programs are sustained with a consistent focus, (b) utilize collaborative learning approaches, (c) assess growth through reflection and feedback, and (d) use action research to support continual improvement. This study aims to provide valuable insights to school districts and researchers regarding the implementation of sustained and job-embedded professional development for school leaders, with a specific focus on leadership development.

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Promising Practices for Leadership Development: Exploring a Collaborative Professional Learning and Coaching Program

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Abstract

Given the substantial impact school leaders have on school improvement, the imperative for continuous professional learning for leaders is evident. In this two-year action research study, researchers collaborated with a school division, forming a research-practice partnership, to design and explore a collaborative professional learning and coaching program. The primary objective of this program was to align with local leadership standards and foster leadership development. The central research question was: How does implementation of a collaborative professional learning and coaching program contribute to leadership development? Data were collected from district and school leaders and included pre and post surveys, interviews, and focus groups. The findings of this study indicate that district leadership practices show promising potential in fostering inservice opportunities for leadership development. These practices include the following: (a) ensure programs are sustained with a consistent focus, (b) utilize collaborative learning approaches, (c) assess growth through reflection and feedback, and (d) use action research to support continual improvement. This study aims to provide valuable insights to school districts and researchers regarding the implementation of sustained and job-embedded professional development for school leaders, with a specific focus on leadership development.

Keywords: leadership development, district leadership, professional development, peer coaching

Introduction

Given the extensive influence school leaders have on school improvement and leading teacher and student learning (Goldring et al., 2012; Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Louis et al., 2010), the importance of preparing effective leaders becomes apparent. Engaging in quality principal preparation and ongoing learning experiences, both prior to assuming a leadership position and during their tenure, is noted as beneficial (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Grissom et al., 2021; Mombourquette & Bedard, 2014). This article features research from a two-year action research study where researchers collaborated with a school district, forming a research-practice partnership, to design and explore a collaborative professional learning and coaching program for district and school leaders. The program was aligned to local leadership standards and aimed to foster leadership development through ongoing learning experiences. The study also informed continual improvements to the program design. This article begins with an exploration of the literature on principal preparation, principal professional development, and coaching. The methodology is then outlined and is followed by the findings, discussion,

and conclusion.

Principal Preparation

The importance of preparing and investing in school leaders is noted in the literature (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Meyers et al., 2023; Service & Thornton, 2021; Tingle et al., 2019). A variety of programs exist to support the recruitment, preparation, and development of school leaders. Principal preparation programs are often offered by universities to support leadership development and obtaining certification requirements. However, these programs have faced criticism for their inadequate preparation of aspiring school leaders (Davis et al., 2005; Mendels & Mitgang, 2013). Consequently, many school districts have taken the initiative to create their own pipeline programs or principal preparation initiatives to identify and train potential leaders prior to assuming formal leadership roles within schools (King, 2020; Mazurek, 2022; Primus, 2021; Taylor et al., 2014; Tingle et al., 2019). Gates et al. (2019) examined principal pipeline activities across six large school districts and found variations in the implementation of these initiatives and challenges related to limited time and funding. Others have recommended preservice and inservice programs that are innovative and employ high-quality practices to ensure more effective preparation of principals (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012).

Inservice opportunities are noted as valuable for continuous professional and career-long principal learning and leadership development (Goldring et al., 2012; Mendels & Mitgang, 2013; Meyers et al., 2023). High leadership capacity districts and schools develop structures and processes to support sustained learning (Lambert, 2011). These opportunities are particularly beneficial for those in their novice years (Mendels & Mitgang, 2013) as these individuals often experience professional isolation and loneliness (Slater et al., 2018). Previous research has also found that school districts need to adopt a balanced approach to leadership development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007) utilizing both top-down and bottom-up strategies (LeChasseur et al., 2020; Thessin, 2019). Nehez and Blossing (2022) noted that top-down strategies presented difficulties when districts sought quick reforms. However, top-down strategies can counteract loneliness when they create opportunities for building networks and professional learning communities (Service & Thornton, 2021) and develop structures such as collaborative approaches for engaging district and school leaders (Nehez & Blossing, 2022). Grissom et al. (2021) asserted that to maximize their positive impact, preservice preparation programs, pipeline initiatives, and inservice learning opportunities should prioritize high-leverage practice areas, such as coaching, fostering collaborative cultures, and implementing effective strategic personnel management.

Principal Professional Development

The next section outlines literature related to effective principal professional development starting with sustained and continuous approaches and followed by active and collaborative learning experiences, coaching, assessing growth, and the role of the district.

Sustained and Continuous Approaches

Scholarship emphasizes school leaders need access to inservice opportunities for continuous professional development after principal preparation programs (Evans & Mohr, 1999; Gumus & Bellibas, 2016; Meyer-Looze & Vandermolen, 2021; Meyers et al., 2023). Meyer-Looze and Vandermolen (2021) articulated the need for sustained leader learning: “we cannot assume that once a person becomes a leader, the learning stops. It does not. Leaders need just as much support, care, and professional learning as teachers” (p. 10). Limited studies have examined sustained opportunities for professional development with a focus on leadership development (Barnes et al., 2010; Davis et al., 2005; Grissom & Harrington, 2010). Grissom and Harrington (2010) found that ongoing professional development for principals is perceived as supportive in improving their knowledge, skills, and application of what they learned to their practice. There have been criticisms of professional development for school principals; however, these have mainly focused on short-term approaches (Nicholson et al., 2005), disjointedly planned activities (Barth, 1986), and reporting information (Coffin, 1997). Similarly, Gumus and Belibas (2016) examined the relationship between the duration of principals’ participation in professional development activities and their perceived practice of instructional leadership. They found that short-term approaches to profes-

sional development for school leaders that included conferences, courses, and observation visits had no significant effect on their instructional leadership. The above highlights the importance of sustained and continuous approaches to principal professional development.

Active and Collaborative Learning Experiences

There is extensive research on professional development, and in the literature the recommended approaches prioritize active and inquiry-based learning (Adams et al., 2021; Cunha et al., 2020; Gumus & Belibas, 2016; Timperley, 2011; Zepeda, 2019). Others argue for the use of the term *professional learning* rather than *professional development* to characterize professional inquiries into practice and sustained learning experiences when compared to traditional one-off approaches (Timperley, 2011). Friesen and Brown (2022) contended for collaborative and iterative approaches to professional learning. Additionally, Gumus and Belibas (2016) found that when school leaders engaged in active learning, such as coaching, networking, and action research, this had a positive impact on their instructional leadership capabilities. Furthermore, these leaders demonstrated an increased commitment to investing their time and efforts in enhancing teaching and learning. According to Cunha et al. (2020), principals value professional development, which emphasizes the importance of leadership skill development through active learning methods like job shadowing and self-reflection. The principals in their study expressed a desire for future professional development to include peer learning, coaching, field trips with job shadowing, and action research. Zepeda (2019) noted similar strategies, such as peer coaching, action research, and job-embedded learning, as desired forms of professional development. In their study, Adams et al. (2021) showed how job-embedded networks where leaders engaged in collaborative inquiry contributed to building leaders' competence and confidence. Others have also recommended job-embedded opportunities for building leadership capacity (Meyer-Looze & Vandermolen, 2021).

Coaching

Grissom et al. (2021) highlighted coaching as a high-leverage practice for inservice learning opportunities. Coaching can be described as a "relationship between two (or more) people committed to establishing and implementing goals and working together to achieve them" (Robertson, 2016, p. 18). The reciprocal relationship of coaching (Goldring et al., 2012) provides an opportunity for one-on-one inquiries, problem solving, and new skill development (Duncan & Stock, 2010; Goldring et al., 2012). Coaching focuses on improving performance related to a problem of practice; it is a collaborative partnership between colleagues. The coach gains a better understanding of the school context, and the leader learns through reflecting and refining their leadership practices while enacting them (Ely et al., 2010; Lochmiller, 2014).

When coaching is job-embedded, it allows both the coach and the leader to learn while providing a level of support and accountability (Lochmiller, 2014). Honig and Rainey (2019) re-examined data from previous studies on central office leadership support for principal supervisors and found that on-the-job support, such as internal coaching, was more beneficial than external coaches. Simon et al. (2019) examined a coaching program for beginning principals and found that the pairing of the beginning principals with master principals was linked to the success of the program. The program, which was customized for individual context, timing, and location, used a practice-centered approach (e.g., school visits) and a safe place for beginning principals to engage in professional conversations and collegial sharing. Master principals also benefitted from these conversations and sharing of ideas. Additional support for peer coaching is highlighted by Parker et al. (2018) who advocated for peer coaching as a means for professional development that is underutilized and holds potential as a low-cost resource. They suggested that peer coaching is a relational process that fosters dialogue and continuous feedback but takes time to set up and requires a relational foundation to be effective.

Research shows that principals tend to benefit from job-embedded coaching support (Celoria & Roberson, 2015; Goldring et al., 2012; Grissom et al., 2021; Meyer-Looze & Vandermolen, 2021). Meyer-Looze and Vandermolen (2021) found that principals' learning transfer was positively impacted by their time with leadership coaches and by their interaction with peers. Others noted that the personalized nature of learning is a benefit of coaching (Carey et al., 2011; Ely et al., 2010; Lochmiller, 2014; Reiss, 2015). In a study involving 12 professional development days and 70 job-embedded coaching sessions over a two-year period, leadership coaching capacities were improved through formal learning initia-

tives that were structured and responsive to learning needs (Huggins et al., 2021). Wise and Hammack (2011) found that participants recognized the significance of coaching competencies and their connection to the implementation of best practices in the coaching relationship. Additional research highlights how coaching contributes to the growth and continual learning of individuals and benefits all levels in a school district (Robinson et al., 2009).

Assessing Growth

Professional development approaches should also align with prior learning and consider principals' individual development needs (Goldring et al., 2012; Huber, 2013; Simkins, 2012; Wright & da Costa, 2016). Others have contended for a formative approach when seeking to assess leadership development (Guskey, 2012; Ladegard & Gjerde, 2014; Solansky, 2010). Day and Dragoni (2015) argued for an approach focusing on growth and change in relation to developmental outcomes rather than performance-based outcomes with ongoing support and resources. Taylor et al. (2014) emphasized the importance of aligning programs with local leadership certification standards and contextual factors. However, Welch and Hodge (2018) cautioned against emphasizing only standards and suggested that these programs also incorporate an examination of critical dispositions for leadership.

Role of District

Honig and Rainey (2014) recommended school district leaders play a role in facilitating principal professional learning communities. Providing time and space and assigning groups were noted as beneficial to principal professional development (Liljenberg, 2021). Others suggested that professional development for principals also needs to be well organized (Zepeda et al., 2014). In Meyer-Looze and Vandermolen's (2021) study, principals who attended a professional learning series noted that they needed support from district leaders to be able to fully engage because they experienced stress being away from their school sites. Meyers et al. (2023) found that coherence was created when district and school leaders worked alongside each other and engaged in learning together. This research points to the value of leaders at all levels learning together rather than merely organizing or providing oversight in professional development.

Methods

Superintendents from an Alberta school district and researchers from a university in Alberta formed a research-practice partnership. Research-practice partnerships have been recognized as beneficial for researchers and practitioners. For example, Brown (2021) examined 11 research-practice partnerships and noted that practitioners benefitted from researchers' expertise in conducting research activities and participating in these research activities. Meanwhile, researchers benefitted from access to research sites and the opportunity to build ongoing relationships. However, research-practice partnerships also present challenges, such as time, determining partner roles, and changes in leadership (Brown, 2021; Coburn & Penuel, 2016).

In the present study, action research (Mills, 2013; Mertler, 2022; Parsons & Servage, 2005) was used to design and explore a collaborative professional learning and coaching program to build leadership capacity in relation to leadership standards and their associated competencies in the province. Hamilton et al. (2022) recommended action research as a methodology for those forming research-practice partnerships. The action research approach employed in this study is often used by educators who are looking to continually make improvements in educational contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It is classified as practical action research and includes stages of planning, acting, developing, and reflection (Mertler, 2022).

In the planning stage, superintendents and researchers identified the need to build leadership capacity, reviewed relevant literature, and developed a research plan. This stage was followed by the acting stage, which included data collection and analysis. The developing stage involved developing an action plan and led to improvements during the study. For example, the findings from the first year informed the design of the collaborative professional learning sessions in the second year. These findings showed that being able to focus on one competency and participating in collaborative learning activities were helpful. The findings also revealed that there was a need for more time and resources to develop peer coaching

relationships and support leaders in focusing on building their individual leadership capacity. An action plan was developed to increase the scheduled time from a half day to a full day for the collaborative professional learning sessions in the second year. As well, additional resources and opportunities to support building peer coaching relationships were curated and utilized in the second year. During the reflection stage, the researchers shared the findings with the superintendents, and both reflected on the process.

The research methods for both years of the study included administering pre and post surveys and conducting interviews and a focus group among district leaders (i.e., directors of learning, assistant superintendents, and division principals) and school leaders (i.e., principals and assistant principals). The question that guided this inquiry was: How does implementation of a collaborative professional learning and coaching program contribute to leadership development?

At the beginning of the study, literature around collaborative professional development and learning and leadership development was reviewed and informed the design of six half-day collaborative professional learning sessions for district leaders and school leaders within an Alberta school district. The superintendents from the school district chose to focus on five of the nine leadership competencies from the Alberta Leadership Quality Standard—Modelling Commitment to Professional Learning, Embodying Visionary Leadership, Leading a Learning Community, Providing Instructional Leadership, and Developing Leadership Capacity—as these were areas in which they sought to build leadership capacity. The opening sessions included team-building activities, developing group norms, and selecting one of five leadership competencies to focus on for the year. Additional sessions supported leaders in developing individual professional growth plans and included collaborative learning activities to deepen understanding of their selected competency. A second aspect of the collaborative learning design was organizing leaders into peer coaching trios with the same competency focus. Some sessions included gaining a deeper understanding of peer coaching and guidance for how to engage in meaningful peer feedback. These sessions helped leaders support each other in achieving goals they listed in their professional growth plans. An additional collaborative learning activity involved giving peer coaching trios the opportunity to visit each other's sites to gain a better understanding of context and to engage in dialogue and feedback.

Recruitment began after ethics was obtained. Fifty-five district leaders and school leaders who were engaged in the collaborative learning sessions were invited to participate in three parts of the two-year study: pre and post surveys, interviews, and focus groups. In the first year, pre survey data ($n = 50$) were collected in the fall, and a post survey ($n = 41$) was administered at the end of the school year. This was followed by interviews ($n = 17$) and one focus group ($n = 3$). At the beginning of the second year, a pre survey was conducted ($n = 47$) in the fall. However, due to the pandemic, the administration of the post survey ($n = 41$) and interviews ($n = 14$) was delayed until the following year. Focus groups in the second year were also affected by the pandemic and not conducted. In each survey, the participants reflected on their own ability to meet five of the nine leadership competencies using a Likert scale (e.g., beginning, developing, achieving, and excelling), which were based on provincial leadership standards. The pre and post survey also had open-ended questions. Pre survey questions asked the participants to identify their focus competency and provide a rationale with related strategies. The post survey prompted the participants to reflect on their growth in the focus area and the impact of the professional learning series on their growth and to provide suggestions for enhancing the overall professional learning experience.

Exploratory Factor Analysis was used to determine the validity of the pre and post survey items. The Cronbach's alpha measure was used to determine the internal consistency and reliability of the multiple items in the survey as connected to each leadership competency (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The optimal range was set to 0.700 or higher (Kline, 2016). As a result, two of the questions were rejected from further analysis. Descriptive statistics were then used to calculate the frequency and central tendency for each survey item to establish the baseline. For both years, post survey analysis used a paired or matched approach using the participants' pre and post survey responses. Individuals were matched to one of the five identified areas based on their declared area of professional growth (Table 1). The matched pair was used to determine the central tendency of responses based on the participants' perception of their abilities in meeting one of the five leadership competencies. The results from the pre survey (fall, 2018) and the post survey (winter, 2021) were paired-matched, resulting in a sample of $n = 35$ (Table 2). This sample (35/55; 67%) represents the individuals who participated in both years of the study out of the total population invited to participate at the beginning of the study. The merged data set was then imported

into IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27), through which statistical analysis was performed. A Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to determine if there was a median difference indicating either growth, no change, or a decrease in the participants' perception of meeting each of the five leadership competencies over the duration of the study.

Table 1

Pre (2018) and Post (2021) Nonparametric Survey Analysis: Matched Pair (n = 35)

Item #	Statement	Ranks			Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test	
		Negative Post < Pre	Positive Post > Pre	Tie Post = Pre	z-value	p-value
Modeling Commitment to Professional Learning						
1	I engage with others such as teachers, principals, and other leaders to build personal and collective professional capacities and expertise.	3	11	21	2.14	.033*
2	I actively seek out feedback and information from a variety of sources to enhance leadership practice.	1	7	27	2.12	.034*
Embodying Visionary Leadership						
4	I promote innovation that promotes positive change, and foster commitment to continuous improvement.	5	13	17	1.53	.127
5	I access, share, and use a range of data to determine progress towards achieving goals.	2	8	25	1.99	.046*
Leading a Learning Community						
6	I develop a shared responsibility for the success of all students.	6	11	18	1.21	.225
7	I cultivate a culture of high expectations for all students and staff.	7	12	16	0.85	.394
8	I create meaningful, collaborative learning opportunities for teachers and support staff.	4	17	14	2.91	.004*
9	I create an environment for the safe and ethical use of technology.	1	9	25	2.53	.011*
Providing Instructional Leadership						
10	I build the capacity of all teachers to respond to the learning needs of all students.	5	10	25	1.29	.197

Item #	Statement	Ranks			Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test	
		Negative Post < Pre	Positive Post > Pre	Tie Post = Pre	z-value	p-value
12	I demonstrate a strong understanding of effective pedagogy and curriculum.	2	10	23	2.39	.021*
13	I ensure that student assessment and evaluation practices are fair, appropriate and evidence informed.	2	6	27	1.41	.157
14	I interpret a wide range of data to inform school practice and enable success for all students.	7	9	13	0.69	.491
Developing Leadership Capacity						
15	I identify, monitor, and empower teachers in educational leadership roles.	7	15	13	1.71	.088
17	I promote team building and shared leadership among members of the school community.	7	11	17	0.94	.346

Note. * $p < 0.05$

Qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, and open-ended survey questions were analyzed using thematic data analysis and two-cycle coding (Miles et al., 2014). Members of the research team engaged in multiple rounds of coding, which included reviewing transcripts, assigning descriptive codes, and then meeting to discuss themes for interrater reliability. Themes were collapsed into categories and then organized alongside the research questions. Quantitative and qualitative data were integrated each year and reviewed by multiple members of the research team. This process allowed for triangulation of data and contributed to the trustworthiness and reliability of the findings. This paper will focus on the overall findings of the study.

Findings

Data were collected and analyzed during both years. Three methods of data collection were used: pre and post surveys, interviews, and focus groups. Outlined below are the findings following the data analysis for both years of the study.

Quantitative Findings

Quantitative findings from the pre and post surveys show that the participants' perceptions of growth in leadership competencies demonstrated either growth or no change but no decrease in meeting each of the five leadership competencies during the study. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to determine if there was a median difference indicating either growth, no change, or a decrease in the participants' perception of meeting each of the five leadership competencies over the duration of the research project. A majority of the 35 participants indicated either growth or experienced no change with respect to their perception in meeting each of the five specific leadership competencies over the duration of the study. Of the 14 items, there was a statistically significant median increase in six of the items ($p < .05$) with respect to indicating growth (Table 2).

Table 2*Pre (2018) & Post (2021) Nonparametric Survey Analysis: Matched Pair (n=35)*

Item #	Statement	Ranks			Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test	
		Negative Post < Pre	Positive Post>Pre	Tie Post = Pre	z-value	p-value
Modeling Commitment to Professional Learning						
1	I engage with others such as teachers, principals, and other leaders to build personal and collective professional capacities and expertise.	3	11	21	2.14	.033*
2	I actively seek out feedback and information from a variety of sources to enhance leadership practice.	1	7	27	2.12	.034*
Embodying Visionary Leadership						
5	I access, share, and use a range of data to determine progress towards achieving goals.	2	8	25	1.99	.046*
Leading a Learning Community						
8	I create meaningful, collaborative learning opportunities for teachers and support staff.	4	17	14	2.91	.004*
9	I create an environment for the safe and ethical use of technology.	1	9	25	2.53	.011*
Providing Instructional Leadership						
12	I demonstrate a strong understanding of effective pedagogy and curriculum.	2	10	23	2.39	.021*

Note. * $p < 0.05$

As the Wilcoxon signed-rank test showed no significant mean difference in the other eight items, there is no compelling evidence from the survey data that the participants' responses indicated growth in relation to these leadership competencies. Based on these results, consideration must be given to understanding the limitation of the data reflecting only four levels of measurement and the median value only reflecting two discrete levels (2 and 3). As a result, it is difficult to ascertain whether participant selection indicated a growth response or an undecided response. Another consideration for what might be affecting these results is an issue of data drift. In the second year of the project, 41% of the participants changed the competency they focused on among the five competencies. This change of focus, during this time, could be attributed to a change in participant perceptions based on current realities and settings. The second year of the study was extended due to COVID-19. A change of focus could be due to having to meet the dynamic challenges of COVID-19, being placed in a new leadership position, and/or being transferred to a new school or building.

Qualitative Findings

Qualitative findings highlight the participants' perceptions of how the school district was supporting their leadership development through the collaborative professional learning and coaching program. These findings are organized into four themes: (a) sustained focus with support, (b) collaborative activities fostered unified focus and teamwork, (c) coaching promoted continued learning and created safe spaces, and (d) reflection and feedback.

Sustained Focus with Support

One of the findings was that the professional learning sessions that the school district implemented provided a sustained focus with support for leadership development. School and district leaders noted that being asked to focus on one leadership competency and being in a group with individuals who had the same competency focus were beneficial. One participant noted that having this singular area of concentration helped them be "hypervigilant and very focused" and led to meaningful and beneficial discussions. The competency focus created a space to discuss learnings and share resources and fostered accountability. The targeted focus was described by another participant as the "biggest piece [they] found most helpful and just what it looked like was that [we] were all focussed on the same thing and sharing."

A supporting practice was the time provided through the collaborative learning sessions, which took place every four to six weeks. This allotted time was essential to the participants being able to actively engage in the collaborative learning sessions and peer coaching opportunities focused on the leadership competencies. One participant noted that "release time was available and sub costs covered" as well as "freedom to schedule the time around their schedules." This finding points to the importance of flexibility, autonomy, and providing necessary resources. Release time and financial resources were particularly important for school leaders, many of whom were required to teach during a portion of their day. A participant described that "on a district level, they were committed to, putting some dollars behind [to ensure leaders] had the opportunity to support one another." While time was valued, one participant requested "more time on certain things," especially "hands-on parts."

Collaborative Activities Fostered Teamwork and Unified Focus

Another theme identified from the qualitative findings was how collaborative learning activities fostered a unified focus and teamwork. These activities contributed to a sustained focus for leadership development and included half-day sessions in the first year and full-day sessions in the second year along with peer coaching. The collaborative learning activities designed and sustained by the district promoted collaboration between schools, cultivated teamwork, built trust, and led to the sharing of strategies, ideas, and resources. According to a participant:

I have no problem picking up the phone and talking to any one of the administrators within our division when I need information about a student ... rather than all of us working individually, we work as a team across the division, and I think that's been super beneficial.

Deeper relationships were built between individuals with varying roles across the school district, which led to a more comprehensive understanding of the system and value for the different perspectives of individuals in these roles. Barriers were removed between roles and departments, and instead of looking out for oneself, area, or building, the participants had a unified focus. One participant spoke to this unifying focus and said it was about "what's good for all kids" and "not being individual schools, but a school system that works together." Another participant talked about how the collaborative learning between school and district leaders promoted a "more collaborative leadership process, not just in involving the school leaders, but leaders within the staff themselves." Trust was developed, and this supported school and district leaders working together and building coherence across the district. This is evident in what another participant shared: "There's a trust and I think that's important. There's more of a trust now, amongst administrators. There's an understanding that we're more solidly now a division than separate schools."

Coaching Promoted Continued Learning and Created Safe Spaces

Another theme identified was the continued learning assisting leaders through coaching. A participant talked about how trust was built in the district “between leaders and administrators” when district leaders modelled coaching practices and how this made the “peer coaching piece easier.” Another participant described how trust was developed and how this contributed to creating a safe space for peer coaching and fostered dialogue focused on growth and development rather than evaluation. The participant shared:

It allowed us to question each other. It included different questioning techniques that we could do modeling and allowed those conversations to go a little bit deeper, but it also allowed us to uncover some possible issues that we might not have. But then we were able to work through with our partners a collaborative approach to those solutions, to those, issues, to continue to support and grow. When we would check in with each other then, we could talk about, hey, last time you had mentioned you were dealing with this. How has that gone? Then we would talk about how they might’ve grown in that process. So, knowing that there were people from the division office that were sitting in our groups, but often there wasn’t, I think it created a safe framework to have those discussions and not feel like we were being evaluated. I think because our norms are set up in such a way that everyone affected everyone in the group. It just gave us a great opportunity to just collaborate and share.

District leaders provided specific resources on peer coaching. One participant said they were “shown videos regarding coaching and peer to peer feedback.” Another participant said they engaged in “clear and concise conversations involving trust and positive relationships.” Engaging in the ongoing peer coaching opportunities was described by a participant as “very self-reflective” and “key to growth as a leader.” One participant noted that the peer conversations were “wide-open and weren’t judgemental at all.” Sharing resources with each other when meeting with a peer coaching partner and hearing what individuals were doing was explained by a participant as a “part of toolbox” that they used to “influence [their] own work.” Professional growth plans supported these peer coaching conversations. A participant described the value of using these growth plans to give “each other feedback” and noted how they “visited each other’s schools and then helped support each other.” Professional growth plans also nurtured meaningful reflection in relation to the chosen leadership competency focus.

Reflection and Feedback

A further theme noted in the findings was that leaders had opportunities to reflect on their leadership goals, receive feedback, and show evidence of growth, which fostered shared leadership and developed leadership capacity. The feedback, site visits, and support were found to be valuable to the participants. One participant shared how professional growth plans were used to document “evidence to show the growth” in relation to their leadership competency. District leaders engaged with school leaders and supported them by providing them with feedback on their goals. One participant described this support and said, “we created our goals. They reviewed our goals. They gave feedback on our goals. And they [checked] in with us throughout the year on how our goals [were] going.” This process of giving feedback was modelled and this appeared to be an important aspect of the professional learning and coaching program. Another participant explained that feedback on professional growth plans was received from peers “as well as division leadership, that was very helpful.” One participant stated that the emphasis was on “growth, and the biggest thing was that they kept focusing on it within the growth plan.” Growth and focus were linked to the leadership competency they chose for the year. Toward the end of the study, the leaders’ reflections shifted from prioritizing goal setting for teacher development to emphasizing their own growth as leaders.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore a collaborative professional learning and coaching program with a sustained focus on leadership development in relation to provincial leadership standards. The findings demonstrate how school districts can promote leadership development through the following promising district practices identified in this action research: (a) ensure programs are sustained with a

consistent focus, (b) utilize collaborative learning approaches, (c) assess growth through reflection and feedback, and (d) use action research to make continual improvements.

Ensure Programs are Sustained with a Consistent Focus

In this study, the school district provided continuous inservice opportunities focused on leaders' growth in relation to the leadership competencies as means to promote leadership development. Previous research has recognized the importance of school leaders accessing inservice opportunities following principal preparation (Gumus & Bellibas, 2016; Meyer-Looze & Vandermolen, 2021; Meyers et al., 2023). Inservice opportunities in this study included professional learning sessions that occurred every four to six weeks with a sustained focus on one of the leadership competencies. Few studies have examined sustained opportunities for leadership development with a focus on leadership development (Barnes et al., 2010; Davis et al., 2005; Grissom & Harrington, 2010). In addition to these sessions, leaders were provided with release time to engage in peer coaching, which included school visits. They also received district support for arranging their own schedule to meet, which is consistent with Liljenberg (2021) who noted providing time and space as beneficial. The findings of this study show that the school district used a combination of top-down and bottom-up strategies to support leadership development, which connects to what has been recommended by others (LeChasseur et al., 2020; Thessin, 2019). Further connections are apparent in the literature where others have indicated that leadership development requires substantial time and resources to support learning rooted in practice, and school districts play a central role in providing both (Honig & Rainey, 2014, 2019; Liljenberg, 2021; Meyer-Looze & Vandermolen, 2021). Moreover, the findings of this study show the value of school districts providing time and resources for, and focusing consistently on, leadership development and are consistent with Honig and Rainey's (2014, 2019) findings that district leaders play a supportive role in principal learning.

Utilize Collaborative Learning Approaches

The findings of this study show that the school district intentionally promoted collaboration between school and district leaders and utilized collaborative learning approaches to support leadership development. Half-day and full-day professional learning sessions incorporated collaborative approaches, such as small group discussions, team building activities, and peer coaching. These collaborative approaches are consistent with what Grissom et al. (2021) regarded as high-leverage practices that school districts should prioritize. The relationships between school and district leaders developed as they worked together in small groups focused on the same leadership competency. Further job-embedded learning took place as leaders engaged in peer coaching trios, which included visiting each other's sites, promoted further dialogue around growth in relation to their competency focus, and created a safe space for learning.

These collaborative approaches align with what has been previously noted in the literature. For example, Simon et al. (2019) examined a coaching program and found that the coaching relationships fostered a safe place for school leaders to have professional conversations and share ideas. Zepeda (2019) also noted the value of peer coaching and job-embedded learning. Additionally, Cunha et al. (2020) emphasized active learning methods, such as coaching, peer learning, field trips, job-shadowing, and self-reflection. These findings are also consistent with what other literature highlights on the reciprocal relationship of coaching and how it supports one-on-one inquiry and problem solving (Duncan & Stock, 2010; Goldring et al., 2012) and the acknowledgement that coaching as a high-leverage practice for inservice learning (Grissom et al., 2021). Additionally, Parker et al. (2018) recommended peer coaching as a low-cost resource to support professional development. The inservice opportunities and coaching seen in this study also connect with what another study suggests as favourable top-down approaches for school districts (Service & Thornton, 2021). The findings of this study indicate collaborative approaches were supporting leadership development and collaboration between district and school leaders.

Assess Growth through Reflection and Feedback

The participants recognized the formative approaches used to assess growth in this study as beneficial for their leadership development. This highlights a promising practice for school districts seeking to support leadership development. Previous studies have also pointed to the value of assessing growth (Mendels & Mitgang, 2013) and using formative approaches when assessing leadership development

(Guskey, 2012; Ladegard & Gjerde, 2014).

In this study, the professional growth plan was central to the school district's formative approach. The participants developed a professional growth plan with clearly identified individual goals related to a specific leadership competency, which was then used in peer coaching conversations and for self-reflection. This approach focused on developmental outcomes, rather than performance-based outcomes, which Day and Dragoni (2015) noted as more beneficial. The emphasis on individual areas of growth is also highlighted in previous studies as essential given leaders have different needs when it comes to leadership development (Guskey, 2012; Ladegard & Gjerde, 2014; Solansky, 2010). Moreover, others note the importance of self-reflection (Cunha et al., 2020; Rogers et al., 2016), which was consistent with the findings of this study. Peer coaching trios and site visits created an opportunity for leaders to engage in collaborative dialogue and feedback around their professional growth plans and support each other in reaching their leadership development goals. These opportunities leaders had to learn in and from practice in this study connect with Adams et al. (2021) contention that generative dialogue is effective for professional growth for leaders.

Use Action Research to Support Continual Improvements

Using an action research approach and forming a research-practice partnership with a university supported the school district in making continual improvements (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Establishing this research-practice partnership proved advantageous in this study because the researchers and practitioners were able to collaboratively design the professional learning and coaching program and the researchers were able to offer their expertise in conducting research activities (Brown, 2021; Coburn et al., 2016; Hamilton et al., 2022). Using action research in this study supported this partnership by engaging the researchers and practitioners in a cyclical process of planning, acting, developing, and reflection (Mertler, 2022).

At the end of the first year of the study, the reflections identified what was helpful and informed plans for the second year of the professional learning and coaching program. For example, the participants shared that being able to focus on one competency, along with the collaborative approaches that were used in professional learning sessions, was helpful. However, the participants requested more time and resources to support peer coaching relationships. Improvements were made to the professional learning and coaching program for the second year and included an increase in the scheduled time for the collaborative professional learning sessions from a half day to a full day. Additional resources were provided to support building peer coaching relationships.

Action research offers significant potential for school districts to utilize as a means of making continuous improvements in supporting leadership development. While the principals did not engage in action research themselves in this study, this is recommended by others as an active learning approach for leaders' professional development (Cunha et al., 2020; Zepeda, 2019).

Conclusion

This two-year action research study explored a professional learning and coaching program focused on leadership development for school and district leaders that incorporated collaborative approaches (e.g., small group discussion, team building, and peer coaching trios). Data collection in both years included pre and post surveys, interviews, and a focus group. This study highlights four promising district practices for supporting inservice leadership development: (a) ensure programs are sustained with a consistent focus, (b) utilize collaborative learning approaches, (c) assess growth through reflection and feedback, and (d) use action research to support continual improvements. A limitation of this study was that it only involved one school district in the province of Alberta, and it would be valuable to explore the variety of inservice leadership development programs offered by other school districts in the province and beyond. Additionally, it would be interesting to see to what extent other school districts align their inservice opportunities with leadership competencies and what other areas they emphasize.

This study highlights several implications that can inform school authorities and educators seeking promising leadership practices and sustained opportunities for leadership development. First, the study emphasizes the need for system-level support to provide ongoing inservice opportunities for leadership development. Second, collaborative approaches, including peer coaching, are shown to be effective in

this regard. Third, formative approaches that focus on developmental outcomes enable leaders to assess their own growth and engage in meaningful dialogue about their ongoing leadership development. Lastly, research-practice partnerships and action research can assist school districts in making continual improvements. Amidst the existing challenges of principal preparation and the imperative for ongoing leadership development, these findings provide valuable insights into fostering a sustained focus on leadership development and building collective leadership capacity at the system level.

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