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## Forging Professional Identity: Navigating Conflicting Curricular Principles in on-the-Job Principal Training

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### Abstract

*This article examines the complex process of forging teacher professional identity (TPI) within the context of on-the-job principal training programs, where competing curricular principles often create tension between national policy mandates and the realities of school-level practice. Using an auto ethnographic approach, the author reflects on their dual role as both academic faculty member and program facilitator to uncover how professional identity is shaped, negotiated, and sometimes challenged through this dynamic mediation. The study highlights how the formal curriculum, grounded in managerial and accountability-driven frameworks, often clashes with the informal curriculum that emerges from lived experiences in schools. The findings illuminate the ongoing struggle to prioritize identity development within a programmatic and cultural context that often favors technical skill-building. Faculty members occupy a contested space, navigating external mandates, collegial disagreements, and evolving conceptions of leadership. The academic director's role is both meditational and visionary, working to embed a deeper sense of professional purpose into the curriculum. Through incremental adaptations and narrative advocacy, the program carves out room for leadership as reflective, relational, and anchored in identity. Findings contribute to broader discussions on educational leadership preparation, curriculum coherence, and identity formation in the face of structural contradictions.*

**Keywords:** Professional Identity, Principal on the Job Training, Curriculum Tensions, Autoethnography, Educational Leadership.

### Introduction

The preparation of school principals is increasingly recognized as a pivotal factor in the successful implementation of educational reforms and the advancement of student achievement (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2024). High-quality principal preparation programs are designed not only to develop core leadership competencies but also to equip school leaders with the capacity to navigate complex, policy-driven educational environments (Gates et al., 2020; Grissom, Mitani, & Blissett, 2021). In many national contexts, including the United States, these programs are often aligned with state-based curricula and shaped by explicit regulatory frameworks established by state education departments. These regulations delineate the required content and competencies for licensure, thus defining the professional boundaries within which principals must operate and make decisions about curriculum and instruction (National P-3 Center, 2024).

However, recent research highlights that formal coursework alone is insufficient for the formation of principals' professional identity as school leaders. Increasingly, on-the-job training, including internships, residencies, mentoring, and coaching—has emerged as a critical component of principal preparation (Wechsler, 2023; Hochbein, 2024). Such practical experiences allow aspiring principals to develop leadership skills in authentic school settings providing opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world challenges. These

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immersive experiences help future leaders engage with day-to-day school operations, understand the socio-political context of their work, and develop the adaptive expertise needed to address diverse student and community needs (Lehigh University College of Education, 2024). Moreover, on-the-job learning fosters reflective practice and professional judgment, enabling novice principals to navigate the tension between adhering to regulatory expectations and responding flexibly to school-specific demands. This balance between policy compliance and professional discretion reflects a broader policy logic of accountability and standardization, aimed at ensuring equity and coherence across educational systems (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2024). Yet, the highly prescriptive nature of state regulations can also constrain the autonomy of school leaders, challenging them to reconcile top-down mandates with the complex realities of school life. In this context, robust on-the-job training is not merely supplementary; it is foundational to the development of principled, responsive leadership capable of adapting policy frameworks to the unique cultural and organizational contexts of individual schools (Roblek et al., 2023).

Thus, effective principal preparation must integrate both structured academic learning and meaningful experiential opportunities. Only through this dual approach can school leaders be fully prepared to advance educational quality, promote equity, and lead transformative changes in increasingly dynamic and demanding educational environments.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Evolving Role of Principal Preparation Programs**

School leadership has long been recognized as a critical factor in promoting positive student outcomes and enhancing overall school effectiveness (Gates et al., 2020; Tan et al., 2021). Research consistently shows that effective principals influence student achievement indirectly by shaping school climate, building teacher capacity, and promoting a culture of high expectations and instructional coherence (Hallinger, 2011; Sebastian et al., 2017). In response to this growing body of evidence, principal preparation programs have become central to educational reform initiatives, seen not merely as credentialing routes but as powerful levers for developing transformational instructional leaders (Wechsler, 2023; Hochbein, 2024).

Concurrently, many education systems are grappling with a significant shortage of qualified school leaders. Studies show increasing rates of principal attrition, driven by job-related stress, high accountability pressures, and a lack of systemic support (Lehigh University College of Education, 2024). In the United States, for example, nearly one in five principals leave their position each year, with higher turnover rates in high-poverty schools (Goldring, Taie, & Riddles, 2014). These trends not only exacerbate leadership instability but also place added strain on preparation programs to produce ready-to-lead candidates at a faster pace. The intensifying demands of the role—which now include managing complex policy landscapes, responding to student and community needs, and leading instructional improvement—have expanded the expectations placed on principals (Grissom, Egalite, & Lindsay, 2021; The Wallace Foundation, 2021). As a result, preparation programs must equip future school leaders not only with managerial competencies but also with adaptive expertise, emotional resilience, and a deep understanding of instructional leadership. In contexts where leadership vacancies must be filled urgently, programs often face the challenge of delivering accelerated or in-service training for candidates already assuming leadership responsibilities. These situations require balancing short-term capacity-building with the need for more profound developmental processes (Wechsler, 2023; Hochbein, 2024). High-quality programs address this challenge by integrating practice-based learning, coaching, and reflective supervision that support both

immediate effectiveness and long-term leadership growth (Roblek et al., 2023; Grissom et al., 2021). Even under tight timelines, the preparation process must remain meaningful, ensuring that school leaders are not only credentialed but genuinely prepared to meet the evolving demands of the principalship.

### **State Regulation and Standardization**

Curriculum decision-making does not occur in isolation but is deeply influenced by shifting political, social, and organizational contexts. These forces shape how school leaders interpret and respond to policy mandates (Roblek et al., 2023). Principals today are expected to act as instructional leaders, capable of making informed and context-sensitive curricular decisions within volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments (Chamo, 2022). Such settings require both strategic foresight and adaptive capacity, as principals must balance competing priorities, respond to diverse stakeholder expectations, and manage resource constraints.

Most principal preparation programs operate within regulatory frameworks established by state education departments. These frameworks govern the content, structure, and assessment of leadership training, often aligning closely with licensure requirements and performance standards (National P-3 Center, 2024). While standardization promotes equity and consistency across programs, it can also limit the professional autonomy of faculty and aspiring principals, thereby constraining local innovation and context-responsive curriculum design (Roblek et al., 2023).

Curriculum decisions involve more than compliance with state standards; they must also address issues of equity, relevance, and innovation. Principals serve as both implementers of top-down policies and mediators who interpret and adapt curricular frameworks to their school's unique needs. This dual responsibility underscores the importance of developing decision-making literacy within principal preparation and highlights the need for training that blends technical expertise with reflective practice. Faculty tasked with designing these programs must navigate a complex policy landscape, balancing compliance with creativity and responsiveness.

### **On-the-Job Training and Experiential Learning**

A growing body of research emphasizes the importance of experiential learning—through internships, residencies, coaching, and mentoring—as a core element of high-quality principal preparation (Wechsler, 2023; Hochbein, 2024). These on-the-job experiences immerse aspiring principals in the authentic challenges of school leadership. In curriculum-related domains, such experiences allow candidates to confront real-time dilemmas, such as aligning school priorities with district directives, implementing culturally responsive pedagogy, and balancing diverse stakeholder expectations.

Effective curriculum leadership requires a deep understanding of the foundational elements of curriculum design and implementation. Principals must balance these curricular facets to make informed, context-sensitive decisions aligned with both systemic priorities and school-level realities. Curriculum decision-making is inherently marked by enduring tensions—between central mandates and local needs, structure and flexibility, tradition and innovation. As recent studies note, these tensions reflect deeper philosophical, pedagogical, and practical dilemmas embedded in education systems (Roblek et al., 2023). For instance, leaders must balance centralized standards with the cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic particularities of their communities. They must also reconcile the need for a structured, prescriptive curriculum with

the demand for flexible, responsive learning environments that support student agency. The growing emphasis on digital learning adds further complexity, as principals navigate the integration of online pedagogies in response to evolving student needs and technological landscapes. Programs that incorporate sustained, well-supported field experiences—especially those enriched by reflective supervision—are shown to deepen learning and strengthen leadership efficacy (Wechsler, 2023). These experiences also enable faculty to create learning environments that foster adaptive leadership and critical thinking, equipping candidates to interpret policy with nuance and to make curriculum decisions that are both innovative and contextually appropriate (Roblek et al., 2023).

### **Faculty Perspectives in Program Design**

Despite the focus on standards and accountability, the voices of faculty—who design and implement principal preparation programs—remain underrepresented in the literature (Author, 2022; Orr & Orphanos, 2011). Faculty play a crucial role in translating regulatory requirements into meaningful learning experiences, particularly in how curriculum leadership is framed and integrated into on-the-job training. Research suggests that faculty often act as mediators between state mandates and school-level realities, working to prepare leaders who are both policy literate and contextually responsive (Jean-Marie, Normore, & Brooks, 2009). They face the ongoing challenge of fostering critical reflection while ensuring candidates meet external benchmarks—especially in curriculum leadership, where the tensions between standardization and innovation are most pronounced (Lochmiller, 2014). Understanding how faculty perceive and respond to these challenges is vital for enhancing both the quality of preparation programs and the effectiveness of future school leaders. Their insights can inform how experiential learning is designed, how curriculum leadership is taught, and how aspiring principals are prepared to navigate the complex demands of educational leadership.

Taken together, these bodies of literature highlight the complex interplay between policy, practice, and preparation in shaping principals' curricular decision-making. This study seeks to build on this foundation by examining how faculty members conceptualize and enact curriculum leadership through on-the-job training components in principal preparation programs

### **Research Aim**

This study aims to explore how faculty members in on the job principal preparation programs perceive and design the training of school leaders with regard to curriculum-related decision making, considering state regulation, curricular content, and the inherent tensions involved in curriculum design and leadership.

### **Research Questions:**

- How do faculty members experience and respond to the tensions between policy mandates and school-level realities in educational leadership preparation?
- What insights emerge from reflecting on the faculty role as a mediator between standardization and contextual responsiveness, particularly in curriculum leadership?

## **Methodology**

### **Positioning the Researcher within the Field of Inquiry**

Over the past decade, I have been actively involved in principal preparation within a higher education institution that partnered with the Ministry of Education to develop a national training program. As head of the faculty committee, I led the adaptation of the Ministry's framework into a program centered on cultivating reflective professional identity among school leaders. The program recently shifted from a pre-service to an in-service model, training novice principals during their first year on the job. This change prompted my current research, which draws on data collected over the past two years to examine how such training shapes leadership identity and how faculty mediate between policy demands and the lived realities of aspiring principals.

### **Method**

This study employs autoethnography as its primary methodology, enabling a reflexive examination of my dual role as both researcher and faculty member in a policy-driven leadership preparation program. Autoethnography allows for a nuanced exploration of institutional dynamics through personal narrative, making it well-suited for contexts where professional practice intersects with broader systemic forces (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). My reflections focus on the tensions between external mandates—such as accreditation standards—and the need to foster critical, context-responsive leadership among trainees. Drawing on personal experience, institutional artifacts, and critical reflection, this approach highlights how faculty navigate competing pressures while striving to enact meaningful curriculum leadership. By foregrounding the emotional and ethical dimensions of faculty work, this methodology offers insights that are both situated and transferable, contributing to broader conversations about leadership preparation, faculty agency, and policy mediation in education.

### **Primary Data Sources**

***Reflective Faculty Journals:*** Regular entries written during and after teaching, faculty meetings, and curriculum development processes. These reflections chronicle my thought processes, challenges, negotiations, and decisions as I navigated policy alignment and pedagogical responsiveness.

***Curriculum Development Documents:*** Internal memos, draft syllabi, and program-level planning materials produced during the revision of leadership preparation coursework. These documents reveal how institutional and policy expectations are interpreted and operationalized by faculty.

***Meeting Notes and Internal Correspondence:*** Notes and summaries from faculty meetings where issues of policy compliance, accreditation, and innovation in leadership preparation were discussed. Email exchanges or written memos that reflect tensions, compromises, or concerns voiced among colleagues.

***Narrative Reconstructions of Key Incidents:*** Retrospective accounts of significant episodes that highlight the faculty mediation role (e.g., responding to new curriculum mandates, negotiating accreditation pressures, advocating for field-based learning). These narratives were constructed from memory, reflections, and supporting documents, and are used to frame broader themes of faculty perception and response.

Together, these data sources provide a textured picture of how one faculty member experiences and interprets the dual responsibility of policy adherence and pedagogical integrity. While the study centers on my own reflections, it seeks to offer transferable insights into broader faculty practices and institutional dynamics.

### **Data Analysis**

The analysis followed a thematic narrative approach grounded in autoethnographic inquiry, drawing on the frameworks of Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) narrative inquiry and Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) reflexive thematic analysis. These frameworks support the interpretation of personal experience within institutional and sociopolitical contexts, allowing for both introspective reflection and theoretically informed meaning-making.

All primary data sources, including reflective journals, curriculum documents, meeting notes, internal correspondence, and narrative reconstructions—were examined through an iterative process. Initial coding was both inductive and deductive: descriptive codes such as policy alignment, pedagogical negotiation, and faculty mediation were generated through close reading of the data, while guided by sensitizing concepts drawn from Bourdieu's (1990) theory of practice—notably, field, habitus, and doxa—to understand the structured tensions between institutional norms and individual agency.

Themes were developed through recursive cycles of reading, coding, memo-writing, and thematic refinement. Special analytic attention was given to moments of tension, ambiguity, or contradiction, which served as “critical incidents” (Tripp, 2012) for deeper narrative exploration. Narrative reconstructions were treated not only as illustrative examples but also as sense-making devices, enabling the contextualization of faculty responses within broader curricular and policy shifts.

Reflexive memos and layered journaling were used throughout the process to document evolving interpretations and positional shifts, ensuring analytical transparency and alignment with autoethnographic principles. The resulting themes illuminate how professional identity is negotiated through faculty boundary work, as individuals navigate the dual demands of policy compliance and pedagogical responsiveness in leadership preparation.

**Ethical Considerations:** Although this study is autoethnographic and focuses on my personal professional experience, it also touches on collective faculty processes and interactions with others within an institutional setting. Therefore, ethical responsibility extends beyond protecting my own privacy to considering the implications of including references to colleagues, students, or administrative structures. Therefore All references to other faculty members, administrators, or students are anonymized, Institutional identifiers have been omitted or masked to prevent indirect identification of individuals or programs. In addition I made deliberate decisions about which interactions and events to include, prioritizing those that are analytically meaningful while avoiding unnecessary disclosure of sensitive or potentially harmful information. The goal is not to expose or blame, but to illuminate the systemic conditions and everyday decisions faculty face in the complex work of leadership preparation.

The research protocol was submitted to the institutional ethics committee. Based on the use of self-reflection and secondary materials with no direct involvement of human subjects. These considerations are in line with ethical guidelines for qualitative and self-reflective research, including those specific to autoethnography (Ellis, 2007; Tolich, 2010), ensuring that the inquiry remains both personally authentic and ethically sound.

## Findings

This chapter presents the key findings from an analysis of faculty reflections, meeting notes, and internal communications regarding the development of principal identity within a state-mandated leadership preparation program. The data highlight tensions between policy demands and pedagogical intentions, as well as the negotiation of leadership identity formation in a programmatic and cultural context that often privileges managerial skill acquisition. Six major themes emerged through thematic analysis: (1) Tension Between Compliance and Pedagogy, (2) Resistance to Identity Work, (3) Identity Development as Anchoring Leadership, (4) Practice-Based Identity Construction, (5) Curriculum as a Site of Mediation, and (6) Leadership as Meaning-Making.

Theme	Sub-Themes	Main Concepts
<b>1. Tension Between Compliance and Pedagogy</b>	- Standardization vs. developmental needs	- Bureaucratic outputs
	-Navigating accountability demands	-Policy constraints
	-Flexibility within mandates	-Pedagogical compromise
		-Adaptive leadership
<b>2. Resistance to Identity Work</b>	- Faculty skepticism	- Technical orientation
	-Managerialism vs. professional growth	-Rejection of abstract learning
	-Identity as “unnecessary theory”	-Preference for skills training
<b>3. Identity Development as Anchoring Leadership</b>	- Identity as moral compass	- Anchored leadership
	-Navigating system-value tensions	-Value-driven practice
	-Leadership as a “way of being”	-Inner stability amidst change
<b>4. Practice-Based Identity Construction</b>	- Authentic dilemmas as learning tools	- Experiential learning
	-Reflective sense-making	-Situated reflection
	-Linking practice to theory	-Identity-in-practice

<b>5. Curriculum as a Site of Mediation</b>	- Hybrid design strategies	- Policy-pedagogy interface
	-Curriculum as negotiation	-Reflective curriculum
	-Faculty as mediators	-Political design work
<b>6. Leadership as Meaning-Making</b>	- Leadership beyond behavior	- Interpretive practice
	-Identity as interpretive lens	-Reflexivity
	-Ethical and conceptual framing	-Meaning over mechanics

Table 1. Themes, Sub-Themes, and Main Concepts

**Theme 1:** Tension between Compliance and Pedagogy

A persistent theme throughout the data was the challenge of reconciling state-mandated requirements with the faculty’s pedagogical goals. The program was expected to demonstrate accountability through standardized outputs—most notably, structured reform plans authored by first-year principals. While these outputs served bureaucratic ends, several faculty members viewed them as potentially misaligned with the lived realities and developmental needs of novice school leaders.

“We are required to submit a sample of participants’ written reform plans as part of our compliance report to the Ministry.”

—Internal Email Correspondence, February 7, 2025

In response, the academic director sought to embed flexibility within rigid formats, proposing modifications that allowed for contextual relevance and professional reflection. This negotiation reflects an ongoing effort to balance external expectations with a more meaningful, developmental approach to leadership learning.

**Theme 2:** Resistance to Identity Work

In this meeting, I introduced the Six Facets Model I developed (Chamo, 2022) for pre-service principals (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Six Facets Model

Several faculty members expressed skepticism or resistance to embedding professional identity development within the program curriculum. These perspectives framed identity work as abstract, theoretical, or unnecessary, especially in light of the practical challenges faced by principals in the field.

“They don’t need to be theorizing their identities—they need to know how to run a school, manage staff, deal with parents.”

“I wouldn’t place identity at the center—I would focus on values. Everything revolves around values.” Another team member added: “Overall, it’s nice and brings some order, but why separate pedagogy? Everything is pedagogy.”

While the model appeared intuitive and easy to grasp from my perspective, it was not immediately accessible to all participants. Later, I proposed a comparative framework to facilitate discussion on the distinctions between personal and professional identity. Personal identity is primarily centered on the self and characterized by unique, individual attributes. In contrast, professional identity is shaped within shared fields of meaning that are associated with the role of the school leader. While personal identity is typically understood through a psychological lens, professional identity is more appropriately examined through a socio-cultural perspective

—Meeting Notes, January' 2024

—Reflective Faculty Journal, July, 2023

“You’re trying to turn them into philosophers.”

—Reflective Faculty Journal, April, 2024

Such comments reveal a prevailing orientation toward technical and managerial competencies as the core of leadership preparation. Identity development was often marginalized or dismissed as incompatible with the urgent demands of school practice.

**Theme 3: Identity Development as Anchoring Leadership**

In contrast to the resistance described above, the academic director and select colleagues advocated strongly for centering identity development in leadership preparation. This position was grounded in the belief that identity acts as an anchor in navigating systemic pressures, policy changes, and value conflicts.

“When the policy shifts... or when they feel moral dissonance between their values and system demands, what anchors them? Not a checklist. Their identity as leaders does.”

—Reflective Faculty Journal, April, 2024

This emphasis on identity as foundational challenges the notion of leadership as a set of disaggregated skills. It repositions leadership as a way of being that is negotiated in practice, shaped by values, and responsive to complex, often contradictory environments.

**Theme 4: Practice-Based Identity Construction**

Faculty discussions and program modifications revealed a shared recognition—if not always consensus—that identity development is most effectively cultivated through engagement with authentic, practice-based dilemmas. Rather than beginning with theoretical models or generalized frameworks, the redesigned pedagogical approach prioritized reflection on lived experiences.

“They’d gain more by reflecting on real tensions they’ve experienced... how they navigated staff resistance, or made sense of contradictory expectations.”

—Meeting Notes, February, 2025

“We redesigned sessions to begin with real dilemmas from the principals’ schools, then mapped those dilemmas onto theoretical models.”

—Reconstructed Incident Narrative, December 2024

This experiential structure served as a bridge between abstract theory and concrete leadership practice, enabling principals to construct meaning and develop professional identity through critical sense-making.

**Theme 5: Curriculum as a Site of Mediation**

The curriculum emerged as a key site where competing agendas—state policy, faculty vision, and student needs—were mediated. The academic director played a central role in designing and defending hybrid formats that preserved core policy requirements while embedding reflective, identity-oriented elements.

“We’re not expecting full-scale change—but we are asking them to articulate a concrete, contextually grounded initiative.”

—Internal Email Correspondence, February, 2025

“I needed to rethink how [the plenary] was delivered... creating a two-way bridge.”

—Reconstructed Incident Narrative, December 2024

These adaptations reflect the faculty’s efforts to hold space for both institutional accountability and pedagogical depth, positioning curriculum design as both a technical and political act.

A final theme centers on the conception of leadership itself—not as a checklist of behaviors or skills, but as a process of continuous meaning-making. The academic director’s reflections emphasized the importance of helping principals move beyond immediate problem-solving toward framing their challenges within broader conceptual, ethical, and organizational frameworks.

“Leadership is not just a role; it’s a way of being that’s constantly negotiated through power, policy, and practice.”

—Reflective Faculty Journal. May, 2024

“I realized I’ve been mimicking leadership rather than leading from who I am.”

—Principal Reflection, cited in Journal Entry

In this view, leadership development is inseparable from identity formation—it requires cultivating the capacity to interpret, critique, and reframe experience in ways that generate insight, agency, and direction.

In sum: The findings presented in this chapter illuminate the ongoing struggle to prioritize identity development within a programmatic and cultural context that often favors technical skill-building. Faculty members occupy a contested space, navigating external mandates, collegial disagreements, and evolving conceptions of leadership. The academic director’s role is both mediational and visionary, working to embed a deeper sense of professional purpose into the curriculum. Through incremental adaptations and narrative advocacy, the program carves out room for leadership as reflective, relational, and anchored in identity.

## **Discussion**

This study contributes to a growing body of research examining how faculty members mediate between state policy requirements and the practical, often unpredictable, realities of schools in the design and implementation of principal preparation programs. Drawing on internal meeting notes, reflective journals, and faculty correspondence, the findings reveal persistent epistemic, political, and pedagogical tensions that faculty navigate in their curriculum leadership roles. These tensions are not simply technical matters of design and delivery; they are deeply connected to foundational questions about the purpose of leadership preparation, the formation of principal identity, and the nature of leadership knowledge.

Consistent with recent scholarship, the analysis reflect the dual pressures on leadership preparation programs: the imperative to comply with increasingly prescriptive, policy-driven accountability structures (Ni et al., 2020; Miller & Reed, 2023), and the parallel need to support authentic professional growth through experiential, context-responsive learning (Diem et al., 2021; Fuller & Hollingworth, 2019). Yet this analysis suggests that faculty are not passive conduits of external mandates or neutral implementers of curriculum. Rather, they function as pedagogical mediators—interpreting, negotiating, and at times resisting policy frameworks in order to preserve space for reflective practice, identity formation, and transformative leadership learning.

## **Reframing Theory as Practice-Centered Inquiry**

### ***Integrating Theory in Practice-Oriented Contexts***

A central tension in the program lay in how theoretical knowledge was introduced and received. Plenary sessions, designed to present conceptual frameworks, were often met with skepticism. Participants described these as abstract, disconnected, or burdensome—echoing contemporary critiques in leadership preparation that highlight a prevailing preference for immediate, practical problem-solving over conceptual engagement (Rigby et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2023). This pattern reflects a deeper epistemological hierarchy that privileges the visible and operational over the reflective and theoretical.

However, as recent studies argue, theoretical frameworks are essential—not as detached content but as cognitive and ethical tools for navigating complexity and ambiguity in leadership (Bickmore & Curry-Stevens, 2021; Ishimaru & Galloway, 2022). The Data indicated that when theory was embedded within participants' real dilemmas—framed as a lens for interpretation rather than an external imposition—resistance diminished and reflective engagement deepened. This aligns with research advocating for praxis-based models that blend inquiry, values, and contextually situated sense-making (Waters & Hightower, 2022; Santoyo & Mendoza-Reis, 2020), thereby reestablishing theory as a dynamic resource for leadership learning.

### **Structuring Curriculum: Mediating Format, Time, and Identity Formation**

The structure of the program—particularly the alternation between plenary and small-group sessions—became a site of ongoing negotiation. While designed to balance conceptual framing with application, participants overwhelmingly favored small-group work, where real-time challenges could be addressed through collegial dialogue. This preference reflects national and international findings that highlight how rigid or standardized formats often misalign with learners' developmental trajectories (Gomez-Johnson & Baxter, 2021; Knapp et al., 2022).

Faculty perspectives diverged. Some advocated for reducing plenary time or adapting it into dialogic formats. Others, myself included, saw value in preserving these sessions as opportunities for identity development and shared inquiry. As Bickmore and Curry-Stevens (2021) assert, curricular formats encode implicit visions of leadership—whether technocratic or transformative. Simply restructuring delivery without interrogating these visions risks reinforcing transactional notions of the role. Our response, therefore, was to redesign formats intentionally, embedding reflective, identity-forming practices even within policy-constrained structures (Nguyen et al., 2023).

### **Assessment as a Site of Tension: Balancing Accountability and Meaning**

The assessment structure—particularly the Ministry-mandated “reform plan”—became a crystallization point for competing goals. Though intended to measure leadership capability, the plan risked becoming a compliance-driven task that felt disconnected from participants' daily realities. This challenge was particularly acute for novice principals still navigating their professional identity and school context.

Our faculty conversations echoed recent critiques of performative assessment models in leadership preparation (Huggins & Scheurich, 2021; Redding & Turner, 2022). To address these concerns, we adopted a hybrid approach: maintaining the reform plan but pairing it with a narrative reflection that encouraged contextual interpretation and value clarification. This compromise was not merely logistical; it represented a pedagogical stance that aligns with

contemporary calls to honor leadership as developmental, situated, and meaning-laden (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2021; Waters & Hightower, 2022). Assessments, in this light, must capture both technical outputs and the reflective processes that shape leadership identity.

### **Leadership Identity: Between the Personal and the Professional**

Perhaps the most significant tension we observed involved leadership identity itself. Participants often entered the program focused on tactical concerns—solving staff conflicts, handling parent issues, managing budgets. Leadership was framed in pragmatic, managerial terms. Yet the program aimed to stretch this orientation—to cultivate leaders who are not only technically competent but also ethically grounded, reflective, and strategically adaptive.

This identity tension resonates with recent research that documents the evolving nature of the principalship, from a managerial to a transformational and equity-oriented role (Gomez-Johnson & Baxter, 2021; Ishimaru & Galloway, 2022; Santoyo & Mendoza-Reis, 2020). Supporting this shift requires more than knowledge transfer; it demands curricular and dialogic spaces where participants can examine their assumptions, clarify their values, and envision leadership as a moral and systemic act. As Waters and Hightower (2022) and also Chamo (2022) argue, the formation of leadership identity must be intentionally scaffolded—not left to emerge incidentally. The data suggest that identity is not simply “developed” but continually constructed through engagement with real dilemmas, peer dialogue, and opportunities to reflect on one’s own leadership narrative. As faculty, we are both guides and co-participants in that process—mediating between institutional mandates and the deeper work of professional becoming.

Taken together, these findings point to a redefinition of faculty work in principal preparation programs. We are not merely instructors or curriculum designers, but mediators—positioned at the intersection of policy, pedagogy, and professional identity. Our role involves translating mandates into meaningful learning, defending space for reflection amid performance pressures, and continually rebalancing the immediate with the aspirational.

The work is both intellectual and political. Curriculum leadership, as these findings suggest, is a form of advocacy—on behalf of the profession, the learners, and the future of educational leadership itself. It calls for strategic compromise, creative design, and an unwavering commitment to preparing principals not only to manage systems, but to lead them toward more equitable, thoughtful, and humane directions.

### **Conclusion**

This study sets out to explore how faculty members in educational leadership preparation programs experience and respond to the tensions between top-down policy mandates and the complex realities of school leadership. In response to the first research question, findings reveal that faculty operate within a highly charged space of mediation: on one hand, they are accountable to regulatory frameworks and standardized criteria set by the state; on the other, they seek to cultivate reflective, context-sensitive, and visionary school leaders. This duality highlights the ongoing negotiation between compliance and creativity that shapes the faculty role.

Addressing the second research question, the study found that faculty serve not only as instructors but also as critical mediators who shape how curriculum leadership is understood and enacted. They work to instill in aspiring principals both the technical skills required for meeting formal expectations and the deeper dispositions necessary for navigating school-level

complexity. However, findings also uncovered tensions within faculty teams themselves. While some faculty members remain deeply committed to broad, visionary goals—such as cultivating school leaders who can think systemically and act with moral clarity—others tend to yield to emotional and managerial pressures from the field. These individuals may prioritize short-term, pragmatic training at the expense of long-term identity formation and transformative leadership goals.

This internal divergence underscores the need to identify and support balancing forces within faculty teams—those who can hold the space between immediate demands and the deeper developmental goals of leadership preparation. These faculty members act as intellectual and pedagogical anchors, ensuring that programs do not drift too far into either rigid standardization or unfocused responsiveness.

The findings suggest that faculty play a pivotal, though often underrecognized, role as policy implementers, pedagogical designers, and moral agents. Their ability to navigate and interpret policy frameworks, while staying attuned to school-level realities, positions them as central figures in the success of principal preparation efforts. Based on the findings of this study, several key recommendations emerge for both future research and the development of educational leadership preparation programs. Programs should prioritize the creation of structured opportunities for faculty dialogue and reflective practice, enabling teams to navigate internal tensions and align around shared visions of leadership development. Faculty themselves should receive support in cultivating adaptive leadership skills, particularly in balancing regulatory demands with the deeper aims of identity formation and visionary practice. Experiential learning components—such as internships and residencies—must be paired with sustained, critical supervision that helps candidates connect practice to theory and develop context-responsive leadership competencies. Additionally, curriculum leadership should be integrated as a central element of training, with explicit attention to how principals can mediate between standardized expectations and local needs. Even in accelerated formats, programs must safeguard against short-termism by embedding long-term goals related to professional identity and system-level change. Future research should explore the evolving professional identity of faculty, the internal dynamics of faculty teams, and the longitudinal impact of different program structures on graduate outcomes, while also examining how preparation programs can more flexibly and effectively align with both policy mandates and local school contexts.

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