

## **A Phenomenological Study of the North Carolina Principal Fellows Program Internship Experience**

Tyler Kulp  
Michele Parker  
Yan Liu

*University of North Carolina Wilmington, USA*

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### **ABSTRACT**

This transcendental phenomenology study explored the paid internship experiences of graduates from the North Carolina Principal Fellows Program (NCPFP). The study addressed the question: How does the paid internship experience in Master of School Administration (MSA) programs help graduates prepare for successful leadership in K–12 schools? Nine graduates from the NCPFP answered questions through phenomenological interviewing. The participants reflected on how their internships prepared them for effective leadership in today’s complex educational landscape. Using transcendental phenomenological data analysis, three key themes emerged: professional networking, crisis management, and the authenticity of practice as critical elements in leadership preparation. The results aligned with National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Standard 8 (2018), which underscores the importance of authentic internship experiences in principal development. Implications highlight the need for continued innovation in principal preparation, including diverse instructional strategies, updated curriculum design, and embedded supports for leadership growth and well-being within MSA programs.

**Keywords:** phenomenology, principal preparation, standards, relationships, authenticity

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Effective principal preparation is crucial for school success, yet current programs show significant shortcomings (Darling-Hammond, 2009; WestEd, 2019). Criticisms include outdated curricula, insufficient fieldwork, and a lack of alignment with contemporary educational standards (Levine, 2005; VanTuyle & Hunt, 2013). Recent research stresses the importance of integrating meaningful fieldwork and internships into principal preparation programs (Pannell et al., 2015; Zubnycki, 2013). Research on principalship indicates that the profession quickly evolves due to accountability practices, technological advances, and community changes (Herman et al., 2017; Kaufman et al., 2017;)

Jackson (2024) characterizes some of these traditional principal preparation programs as lacking in coherence, vision, and structure. Other principal preparation programs are labeled as innovative or exemplary, emphasizing the importance of a coherent curriculum that aligns with current state and professional standards, as well as an intensive internship experience (Jackson, 2024; UCEA, 2018). Scholars show that principal preparation programs need to shift their focus to updated standards-based curriculum and design approaches, essential leadership evolving pedagogy, and fieldwork and/or internships that allow theory to become the practice in training (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012). This study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the paid internship experience to help ensure the quality preparation of future leaders as principals.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review examines the impact of standards and accountability on school leadership, the effects of the Leandro case on educational policies in North Carolina, and the role of internships in principal preparation programs. Additionally, it explores the North Carolina Principal Fellows Program and its contributions to principal training and development.

### Standards on Leadership

The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) established principal standards in 1996, updated in subsequent years to reflect evolving educational needs (Davis et al., 2005; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction [NCDPI], 2013). North Carolina Standards for School Executives (NCSSE), approved in 2006, guide professional development and evaluation (NCSSE, 2006). The standards emphasize strategic, instructional, cultural, and managerial aspects of leadership, with ongoing revisions to address emerging challenges (NCDPI, 2013; NCES, 2012). Research on principalship indicates that the profession quickly evolves due to accountability practices, technological advances, and community changes (George W. Bush Institute, 2016; Herman et al., 2017; Kaufman et al., 2017; NASSP, 2010).

Principal preparation programs need to shift the focus of the programs to updated standards-based curriculum and design approaches, essential leadership evolving pedagogy, and fieldwork and/or internships that allow theory to become the practice in training (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012), potentially shifting towards more of an exemplary approach to principal preparation (UCEA, 2018; Winn et al., 2016). In 2015, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) established the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) (NPBEA, 2015). Along with the PSEL, the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards were developed to guide program design, accreditation review, and state program approval (NPBEA, 2018). These standards provide specificity to the latest performance expectations for beginning-level school and district leaders.

### Principal Standards for North Carolina

In 2003, the Wallace Foundation sponsored a research study titled *Making Sense of Leading Schools: A Study of the School Principalship*. Based on this research project and the ISLLC's initial standards for professional practice, the state of North Carolina approved its initial seven principal standards on December 7, 2006 (Davis et al., 2005; NCSSE, 2006): strategic, instructional, cultural, human resource, managerial, external development, and micropolitical leadership (NCSSE, 2006). A rubric was later released in 2008, and Standard Eight, Academic Achievement, was released in 2011 (NCDPI, 2013; NCES, 2012). With the ongoing additions and addenda to the evaluative standards, North Carolina principals would be assessed on different levels within the standards, termed *elements*. They would be given an assessment score based on standardized testing (*does not meet expected growth*, *meets expected growth*, or *exceeds expected growth*) and given an overall evaluation score on effectiveness (*highly*, *effective*, or *need of improvement*) (NCDPI, 2013; NCES, 2012). The latest revised version of the NCSSE was published in 2013 (NCDPI, 2013).

### North Carolina Principal Fellows Program

In 1993, the North Carolina General Assembly created the North Carolina Principal Fellows Program (NCPFP) to prepare candidates for leadership positions in the state's schools (Bastian & Marks, 2017). The program provides a scholarship loan to attend one of the eleven participating UNC System schools to earn a Master of School Administration (MSA) degree (Bastian & Marks, 2017). In the academic year, Principal Fellows receive \$30,000 to assist them with tuition, books, and living expenses (WestEd, 2019). In the second year, Principal Fellows receive an amount equivalent to the salary of a first-year assistant principal, as well as a stipend for interning under a principal (WestEd, 2019). The program offers one year of academic study and a one-year internship in a public school in North Carolina (Bastian & Marks, 2017).

After completing the program, the Principal Fellow promises to seek and obtain employment in a public school in North Carolina for four years, and the loan is forgiven (Bastian & Marks, 2017; NCPFP, 2020). Principal Fellows who do not meet the requirement or who decide to leave education must repay the loan in full, including interest (Bastian & Marks, 2017). Traditionally, the fellows participating in the program are more effective than other MSA graduates based on student achievement, student absences, and teacher retention rates (based on the outcomes of the NC Teacher Working Conditions Survey (Bastian & Fuller, 2015; Bastian & Marks, 2017; WestEd, 2019). Studies by Bastian and Fuller (2015) have also shown higher graduation rates in MSA programs and higher employment rates after completing the MSA compared to non-Principal Fellow participants.

## **Internships within MSA programs**

Internships have traditionally been part of MSA programs. Field-based internships constitute a significant characteristic of effective leadership preparation programs (Crow & Whiteman, 2016; Darling-Hammond et al., 2010). Several studies (Christian, 2011; Crow & Whiteman, 2016; Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Duncan et al., 2011; Orr, 2011) have noted the importance of high-quality internships embedded in school leadership programs. Typically, there are three types of internships within programs: full-time embedded internships, detached internships with documentation, and course-embedded internships (Crow & Whiteman, 2016). Successful internships can be characterized by many different qualities. Some researchers (Christian, 2011; Duncan et al., 2011) link the success of internships to mentoring, coaching, and the relationship between the intern and the school, while other researchers (Havard et al., 2010; Sherman & Crum, 2009) note success through standards-based experiences and practical leadership responsibility training.

Perez et al. (2011) found that, over an extended period, interns lead with a shared vision of excellence through data-driven approaches, build individual and organizational capacity, and are better prepared to lead after gaining this experience. Meanwhile, Cunningham et al. (2019) discuss how principal preparation programs can help future leaders analyze situations by examining the how and why of situations through transformative and experiential processes to support development. The intended purpose of an internship or fieldwork experience is to provide these interactions and experiences to foster growth toward becoming future school administrators (Cunningham et al., 2019).

## **Paid Internships within NCPFP**

As an NCPFP scholar, the program's second half is designed as a paid internship (NCPFP, 2020). According to the NCDPI site (2023), NCPFP scholars will participate in a one-year full-time internship at a public school in North Carolina. The student will be paid as an assistant principal with no experience (NCDPI, 2023). The requirements for the paid internship are as follows:

- An active, enrolled, full-time student
- 10-month supervised clinical internship with a mentor (Fusarelli et al., 2019)
- Not enrolled in a state-funded position (leave of absence required from previous employment)
- Enrolled at a university that garners the NCPFP scholarship (NCDPI, 2023)

Herman et al. (2022) note that internships with universities have common practices that align with national standards (specifically PSEL and NELP), and that selecting appropriate mentors for interns is part of the redesign process for universities' MSA programs.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study explores how recent graduates from cooperating universities perceive the paid internship experience of the North Carolina Principal Fellows Program (NCPFP). The research question is: *How does the paid internship experience in the MSA program at state universities prepare graduates for effective leadership in today's challenging educational environment?*

### **Phenomenological Study**

Given the educational context of this research, a phenomenological study is ideal because it explores the “how” and “what” of a contemporary phenomenon in a real-life setting (Merriam & Tisdell, 2017; Moustakas, 1994). More specifically, the primary author used transcendental phenomenology to understand principals' prior internship experiences by reflecting on both their subjective acts and their objective aspects (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Participants and Selection**

Purposive sampling was used to identify participants (Peoples, 2021). Nine graduates from a population of over 140 possible candidates were selected, representing all three graduating years (2021, 2022, 2023) and five universities within the UNC System. Their ages ranged from 20 to 49 years. To protect anonymity in this research, the names Jane and John, along with a number, were assigned to each participant.

## Data Collection

Phenomenological interviewing uncovers the essence of experiences by exploring perceptions and reflections (Creswell, 2013; Peoples, 2021). Researchers aim to reveal the deep meanings that guide actions and interactions (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Seidman, 2013). When researchers conduct phenomenological interviews, a single in-depth interview can yield highly trustworthy data for qualitative research (Englander, 2016; Høffding & Martiny, 2015). This research used a semi-structured interview protocol (Peoples, 2021), which covers key questions while allowing for deeper exploration of relevant topics. The researcher sent participants a total of seven questions before the session. Below is an overview of the interview protocol along with its literature background.

**Table 1.**

**Interview Protocol with Literature Connections**

Interview Question	Literature Connection
Q1 What was your perception of being accepted into an MSA program as an NCPFP scholar?	Describe the lived experience while finding hidden meanings - Aguas, 2022; Moustakas, 1994; Seidman, 2013; Van Manen, 1990
Q2 How did you perceive transferring from your previous position to a paid internship?	Describe the lived experience while finding hidden meanings - Aguas, 2022; Moustakas, 1994; Seidman, 2013; Van Manen, 1990
Q3 Can you describe the setting of your paid internship?	Perspective and relation to the phenomena - Aguas, 2022; Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015
Q4 What was your experience with your mentor during the paid internship?	Mentor relationship - NELP Standard 8, specifically Component 8.3, Ni et al., 2022; Pounder, 2011
Q5 In your paid internship, can you tell me an example where you experienced.... a) strategic leadership? Possible probes on mission, vision, alignment b) instructional leadership? Possible probes on learning, assessment c) cultural leadership? Possible probes on equity, inclusiveness, cultural responsiveness d) external development? Possible probes on community involvement	Standards Literature - NELP, NCSSE - Amsterdam et al., 2003; Catano & Stronge, 2007
Q6 How was this experience valuable to you in your principal preparation?	Internship value - Ni et al., 2022, Pounder, 2011
Q7 Anything else you want to tell me about your experience as a paid intern?	Will vary

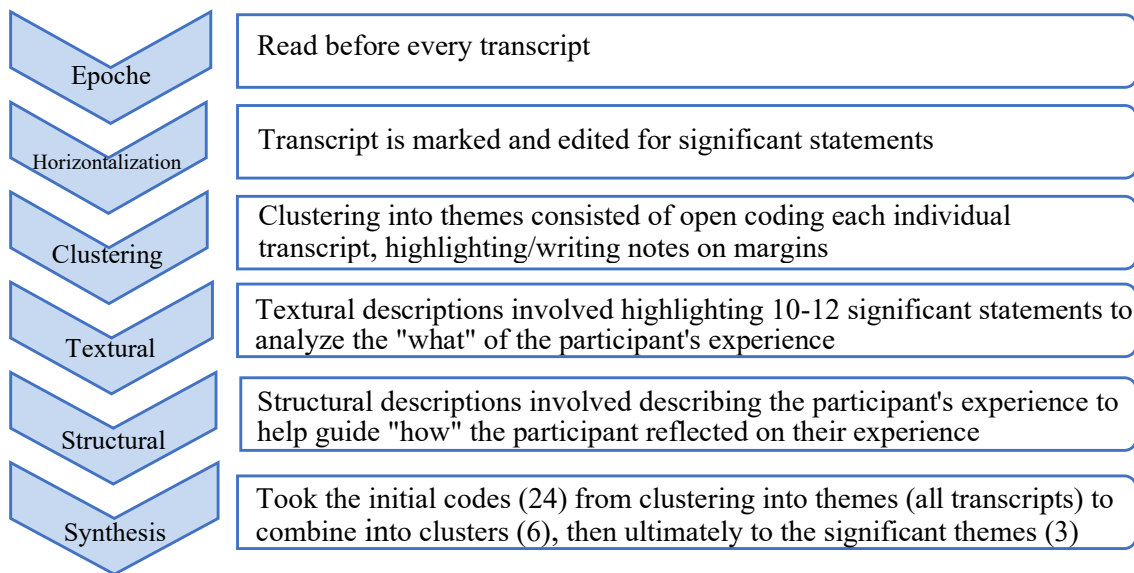
Before collecting any data, the researcher compiled a list of potential participants using several methods, including reviewing university websites and NCPFP media (websites and social media posts). Once the researcher identified an overall population of 140 potential participants, a mass email was sent to the graduates explaining the study and inviting them to participate, with email addresses in the BCC line to protect anonymity. As participants began responding, the researcher

assigned each a participant code (e.g., J1, J2) for confidentiality and used pseudonyms to protect their anonymity (Peoples, 2021). The researcher collected data via Zoom, recording and transcribing all interviews, each lasting less than one hour.

### Data Analysis

Transcendental phenomenology requires researchers to follow a detailed and systematic approach to data analysis, as outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018). Researchers suspend judgment and aim to capture the essence of phenomena, acknowledging that full comprehension remains elusive and cannot be achieved all at once (Peoples, 2021). To analyze transcendental phenomenological data effectively, researchers adhere to a thorough, multi-stage analysis process described by Colazzi (1978), Van Kaam (1966), and Moustakas (1994). This rigorous process preserves the integrity of the phenomena, ensuring that the analysis fully captures them. Explication, a key aspect of this process, investigates phenomena while maintaining their context as a cohesive whole (Peoples, 2021). Figure 1 displays the six stages of explication that the researchers applied in this study.

**Figure 1.**  
**Stages of Explication**



*Note.* Adapted “Collaborative Reflections on a Practical Journey through Transcendental Phenomenology Data Analysis,” by T. Kulp, H. Alzahrani, and M. A. Parker, 2025, *The Qualitative Report*, 30(9), p. 4366 (<https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2025.7973>). Copyright 2025 by Tyler Kulp. Reprinted with permission.

### FINDINGS

This section reports findings, emphasizing three themes and six clusters, derived from twenty-four original codes.

#### Theme One: Professional Networking

Participants emphasized that professional networks were vital to their paid internship experience. They valued the bonds formed with mentors (both on-site and at the university), principals, assistant principals, cohort members, faculty, students, community members, conference presenters, professors, district personnel, and others. They considered these connections essential to successful leadership in today’s educational environment.

#### *Mentor Partnership with a Trusty and Supportive Relationship*

In all nine interviews, each intern reported a positive experience with their mentor. For example, Jane 10 highlights the significance of the partnership between intern and mentor, emphasizing the importance of honesty in preparation:

He did a fantastic job preparing me, told me all the things I didn't want to hear, but I needed to hear. He had no problem having a crucial conversation when necessary . . . [He] pointed out faults, you know, as we say, areas of improvement or you know, I wasn't lulled into a false sense that I was doing a good job.

She went on to say, "That's why I didn't hesitate to take on the challenge [of the paid internship]" and "if I don't know something, I'm able to reach back for help." She continues to describe that her program still provides a "directory email," and when she "rolled across the stage, there is still a support system for me now." These connections she built during her paid internship remain prominent in her leadership today, as Jane 1 is now a high school principal.

Mentorship remained a strong theme throughout the research. Jane 5 described her excitement about connecting with "future administrators from across the state" and "developing those relationships" while completing her MSA and internship. From the start of the paid internship, participants found connecting with others highly valuable.

### ***Networking with Varied Stakeholders***

Throughout the interviews, the interns expressed their gratitude for the connections they had with other professionals and stakeholders. Jane 1 described connections with various professionals during her experience as a paid intern:

So we had some leadership coaches that came in, former retired superintendents, former principals, people who work the district office. . . . I would have coaching sessions once a month. . . . I had their cell phone numbers . . . I had all the support I needed.

Jane 8 described how connecting with community members after a chaotic event was an important part of her internship: "We had a huge community meeting at the end of the year where anyone from the community could come in and voice their concerns, frustrations, needs. . . . It was a very powerful experience for me."

Even in a difficult situation, this experience with Jane 8 shows the importance of professional networking with other professionals in the community as valuable preparation for leadership.

Jane 9 focused on different aspects of professional networking: "There are experienced practitioners who can vouch for these different ideas . . . it gave me the confidence by looking at their research and hearing what other respected experienced educators have to say."

The commonality among these experiences was the importance of building relationships and professional connections across their schools, communities, and country. The theme of professional networking was a vital aspect of the paid interns' professional growth and helped them prepare for successful leadership in today's challenging educational environment.

## **Theme Two: Crisis Management**

The second theme, *crisis management*, stems from clusters of *strategies developed in response to COVID-19 and related emergencies*. This theme was developed from five original codes: chaos, COVID-19, challenge, new, and present. To capture the essence of the experience surrounding the theme, the researchers provided both textural and structural descriptions.

### ***Strategies Developed in Response to COVID-19***

The COVID-19 pandemic was a major part of the paid interns' experiences during the early 2020s. Learning strategies to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic were a common topic in interviews. Jane 9 discusses her experience with the issue of attendance in her alternative school setting: "I came in right as the limited attendance from the Pandemic was lifting, and things were kind of dismantled and had sort of come off the wheels [*sic*]. I really had to build everything from the ground up."

Later in the conversation, Jane 9 discussed learning how to address safety and student movement towards the end of COVID-19: "Things were deconstructed . . . people asked me what your plan for student movement is . . . so we had to figure out everything."

### ***Related Emergencies***

As safety planning remains an important aspect of crisis management, dealing with authentic emergencies during the internship proved to be a common topic. Jane 2 described one emergency experience that helped prepare her during her internship:

I had my first car chase . . . we had a student leave the campus because he was upset, he did not get a popsicle. Our security officer saw him run out the front door. Myself, the assistant principal, the principal, and our security officer went after him. I hopped in my car . . . then the school bus came up behind me, and the security officer got her close enough to jump out and scoop him up. We were close to a mile up the street.

She further describes the importance of the event by saying, “It was crazy; that is something you cannot get in a textbook.”

During the first few months in the paid internship, Jane 12 experienced two emergencies: first, a natural disaster, and then the death of a staff member. She explained, “So my first week, as an assistant principal intern, I am in muck boots downtown clearing out stores like we’re working.” She continued, “Then we were doing the right thing for our community as a whole . . . we’re going on just to different businesses; we just want to help.” Discussing the second crisis, she described, “This was my 15th year in education, and I never had a staff member die. You know, we had kids who witnessed everything, and my principal never experienced that. You do the best [you can].” She ended our conversation reflecting on the events by saying, “That you get to learn, and I think real life is the best teacher . . . the paid internship bolsters that.”

Crisis management was a major theme throughout the interviews. In dealing with different, chaotic events or planning for them, crisis management helped prepare these future leaders for today’s challenging educational environment.

### **Theme Three: Authenticity of Practice**

The third theme, *authenticity of practice*, stems from the clusters *program expectations* and *utilizing data for change*. These clusters were formed from 13 codes: standards, diversity, equity, data-driven, student learning, focus, mental health, problem-solving, mindset, wisdom, reflection, opportunity, and confidence.

#### ***Program Expectations***

Participants shared that the authenticity of practice was a vital part of their paid internship experience. This theme particularly addressed sub-question 1 by examining the components of the professional standards and highlighting the importance of genuine practice in administrative tasks in preparation for future leadership of K-12 educational buildings. This theme was prevalent due to the different aspects of interns’ professional growth, including leadership and learning to lead key tasks outlined in the professional standards. However, in each experience, the cluster of program expectations was prevalent in encapsulating the original codes. To analyze this idea further, Table 2 outlines the different ways in which the paid interns experienced alignment with professional standards.

To discuss some specific examples of the authenticity of practice theme through the cluster of program expectations, Jane 1 described her program, along with a specific example highlighting the standards through the program expectations to give her an authentic example of practice: “I will give kudos to [university], like they really have a great program laid out . . . Everything is just so organized, and you’re just supported along the way.” Further, Jane 1 went on to elaborate on the Strategic Leadership standard(s):

I was a part of the school leadership team, where we sat down and worked on the school improvement plan. . . . where you are really leaning on your principal’s vision and making sure that you’re supporting their vision to the mission for what they have for the school.

Jane 3 discussed the authentic practice of conducting a teacher observation: “He sat down with me, and we did three observations at the beginning of the year together. He showed me how to take low inference notes whenever you’re going into a classroom.”

These stories of authentic practice through the leadership standard are apt examples of how the paid internship program created experiences that helped the paid interns prepare for successful leadership in today’s challenging educational environment.

Table 2

Standard and Alignment with Experiences

Standard	Alignment with Experiences
NCSSE 1. Strategic Leadership + NELP 1. Mission, Vision, and Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Mission and Vision Statement Revisions</li><li>● Mottos</li><li>● School Improvement Team</li><li>● School Leadership Team</li><li>● School Improvement Plan</li><li>● Scheduling</li></ul>
NCSSE 2. Instructional Leadership + NELP 4. Learning and Instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Professional Learning Communities</li><li>● Observations</li><li>● Beginning Teachers</li></ul>
NCSSE 3. Cultural Leadership + NELP 3. Equity, Inclusiveness, and Cultural Responsiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● School Improvement Team</li><li>● Data-driven decisions</li><li>● MTSS (multi-tiered system of support)</li><li>● PBIS (positive behavior implementation strategies)</li></ul>
NCSSE 6. External Development Leadership + NELP 5. Community and External Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Parent Nights</li><li>● Community Nights</li><li>● Parent Advisory Council</li><li>● Surveys</li><li>● Field Trips</li></ul>

Utilizing Data for Change

Jane 8 described an instance where she talked about struggling students with a teacher who helped her with her instructional leadership:

I worked with a BT [beginning teacher] . . . I was able to introduce additional strategies that she could use in class that I had created. It was based on that focus group that had two students with the EC teacher, who was also the BT. We got some student feedback to find out what was working and what wasn't working in class.

Jane 10 discussed an example of utilizing data for change in terms of state testing and how that authentic practice helped her during her paid internship:

So when I sat down during the PLCs, and talked about EOC [end-of-course testing], we needed to see proficiency in biology and growth in English. The whole state was sliding in English at the time, and you know, having these conversations and coming up with interventions, how are we going to track these kids who are bubble kids, who's probably going to be a level three, or who's a high or low three that we need to focus on.

DISCUSSION

The discussion highlights the findings in light of prior research and additional studies for further support. This section is organized by study themes: (1) professional networking, (2) crisis management, and (3) authenticity of practice.

## Professional Networking

In describing the theme of professional networking, it is essential to note that, in transcendental philosophy, self-reflection and intuition take precedence over deduction (Moustakas, 1994). When looking back on the experience of the paid internships, the participants often noted early on and throughout their individual descriptions the importance of the relationships they built and the people who shaped their experience. Led by the mentor relationship, bonds created with professional and stakeholder networking during their experience were vital.

Crow et al. (2002) discussed issues within principal preparation programs early in the 21st century, specifically linking them to a lack of awareness of the extensive community responsibilities required of a principal at the time. Additional research (Christian, 2011; Duncan et al., 2011) links the success of internships through mentoring, coaching, and the relationship between the intern and the school. Even in the report of the NPBEA (2015), when they released the latest administrative standards, they noted the importance of relationship building as they released the new standards.

This theme of professional networking, built into the program, was highly prevalent in this research. Whether it was the mentor relationship or other educational leaders within the building, community, or county, professional networking was an important thread throughout the paid internship experience.

Drake et al. (2023) discussed in their recent quantitative study that principal mentors played a key role in determining the quality of their internship experience, particularly in areas such as autonomy in expertise and the support they received. Drake et al. (2023) discussed how mentors' encouragement of proactive behavior and pushing interns to seek opportunities with other professionals beyond those directly assigned (mentor) helped ensure interns engage in real-time problem-solving experiences. This theme of professional networking is a crucial part of the internship experience and was supported by the paid experiences.

## Crisis Management

Within phenomenological research, Creswell (2013) notes that sometimes, finding individuals who all (within the study) experienced a common phenomenon can be difficult. Given the study's time frame (2021 to 2023), the crisis management theme would likely remain relevant, as the COVID-19 pandemic continued to impact our world into 2024 and beyond.

Principal preparation is about developing. The emphasis within the new principal preparation standards, NELP (2018), specifically highlights Standard 8: Internship, with three components: emphasizing an authentic field and/or clinical experience, minimum time frame requirements, and effective mentorship are crucial for the experience. Also, new research using the INSPIRE software to analyze the internship experience embedded within the programs could be incredibly beneficial for future research, as noted by Ni et al. (2022).

With all these emergent situations, the heightened awareness of crisis during the principalship internship was worth noting in preparation. Zhang et al. (2022) note that a study of Chinese colleges found higher levels of anxiety among graduates with academic degrees than among graduates of other professional programs. Mudiwa et al. (2023) also stated that school administration interns who were impacted by the pandemic needed to learn flexibility and lead with intentionality as future characteristics of leaders within the context of crisis.

One possible addition to preparation programs could be an idea stemming from a group of professors in North Carolina. Allen et al. (2020) discuss the importance of preparing principals for trauma-sensitive leadership. In their study, Allen et al. (2020) discuss incorporating brain-based research and examining different adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Trauma-informed leadership would at least allow future principals to be aware of the different situations that arise among students and to understand how crises affect the brain. This theme of crisis management is difficult to simulate; however, it is undeniably evident in participants' experiences in the study.

## Authenticity of Practice

Husserl's phenomenology is transcendental because it adheres to discovery through reflection on subjective acts and their objective correlates (Moustakas, 1994). Further, phenomenology commits itself to the descriptions of the experiences by means of the *noema* and *noesis* (Moustakas, 1994). Noema is defined by what is experienced, and Noesis is how it is experienced (Moustakas, 1994). Through these descriptions and definitions of phenomenology, the theme *authenticity of practice* is defined by our participants through the noesis (Moustakas, 1994) of the standards-based approach of the principal preparation program, as informed by the paid internship experience.

Early in the 21st century, both Morrow (2003) and Levine (2005) described how principal preparation programs failed to keep pace with changes in the principalship in the field. Further, Davis et al. (2005) and Murphy et al. (2008) discussed

how principal preparation programs were inadequate training grounds. As the research continued to produce such negative findings on such programs, the standards evolved. In North Carolina, the standards were initially established in 2006 (NCSSE, 2006), then a more explicit rubric and evaluation tool in 2008 (NCDPI, 2013; NCES, 2012), along with a new standard in 2011 (NCDPI, 2013; NCES, 2012), and finally the latest updated standards in 2013 (NCDPI, 2013). Unfortunately, with these updates, the specific concern was on the standardized testing movement in the US, not the actual principalship. As the research focused more on training, Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) and Davis and Darling-Hammond (2012) noted that fieldwork/internships allow future principals to practice in training, and that it needs to be emphasized. However, other researchers (e.g., McCarthy, 2014; Young et al., 2013) noted the limited research on the impact of fieldwork.

With changes to standards under the NPBEA (2015) and the NELP (2018), programs began using different data collection instruments to identify their strengths and weaknesses. The Initiative for Systematic Program Improvement through Research in Educational Leadership (INSPIRE) research collaborative has developed surveys to gain insights into various aspects of the programs from different stakeholders (Ni et al., 2022). As this tool is relatively new and mirrors the latest national standards revisions (Ni et al., 2022; NPBEA, 2015), the amount of empirical evidence remains thin and preliminary (Ni et al., 2022), and there are too few quantitative studies to show the impact of changes (Crow & Whiteman, 2016).

In the current research study, the *authenticity of practice* theme was highlighted through the participants' responses, explicitly stating the importance of referring to the standards (five of the nine participants) and through different leadership opportunities utilizing data to mimic fundamental responsibilities of principals like Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and beginning teachers' programming (all participants). These participants specifically highlighted standards-based approaches used in their paid internships to provide authentic leadership practice. The primary researcher specifically asked, using a cross-section of standards (both national and North Carolina-specific), for examples that highlighted authentic practice. However, he is confident that if he had discussed all eight standards of the latest NCSSE revision (NCDPI, 2013), the participants would have discussed individual experiences correlated with each.

In this study, the finding that participants' responses to the experiences aligned with the standards was interpreted positively. In establishing the theme *authenticity of practice*, the researchers identified additional positive research aligned with this aspect of the paid internship experience. Walker and Gray (2022) discuss the importance of using data in clinical experiences to improve principal preparation. Dexter et al. (2022) note that the specific data within emphasized competencies can serve as prevalent leadership preparation tools to better prepare future leaders. Mudiwa et al. (2023) discussed the essential preparation of principal interns through functional skills and core leadership competencies. Standards-based preparation is essential to a future principal's internship/fieldwork experience, and these authentic practice experiences are fundamental for leadership.

## Implications for Practice

We suggest several implications for principal preparation programs:

- 1. Authentic Field-Based Experience:** The theme *authenticity of practice* suggests that programs should emphasize authentic, field-based internships. Programs might consider incorporating paid internships to enhance practical learning (Winn et al., 2016).
- 2. Program Redesign:** Programs should bridge theory and practice, integrating fieldwork, coursework, and practicums. Collaborative redesign efforts could drive continuous improvement (Dodson, 2015; Walker & Gray, 2022).
- 3. Crisis Management Training:** The theme *crisis management* suggests that programs should include crisis management and trauma-sensitive leadership courses in curricula, reflecting the pandemic's impact on educational experiences (Mudiwa et al., 2023; Allen et al., 2020).
- 4. Professional Networking:** The theme *professional networking* suggests that programs should enhance opportunities for expanding professional networks and ensure high-quality internships by focusing on mentor training (Drake et al., 2023).
- 5. Standards Compliance:** The theme *authenticity of practice* suggests that programs should align with the National Educational Leadership Preparation Standards, which require a minimum of six months of concentrated, authentic leadership internship experiences (Standard 8 Component 8.2).

Overall, integrating these elements could improve principal preparation and better support future educational leaders.

## Limitations

This study has several limitations. Only 9 of 15 initial respondents participated, with a notable gender imbalance (8 females) and limited racial diversity (only Black or African American and Caucasian participants). Additionally, two universities were not represented. Furthermore, the participants' experiences were heavily influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting their education through remote instruction and altered schedules. This pandemic impact was a significant theme in the study. The phenomenological approach also meant that certain perspectives might have been overlooked due to the researcher's current context and horizon.

## Essence of the Phenomenon

The essence of the phenomenon is that, through the lens of professional standards, state universities in North Carolina successfully prepare future school administrators for a challenging educational environment through paid internships, allowing NCPFP scholars to experience professional networking, crisis management, and the authenticity of practice.

## CONCLUSION

This transcendental phenomenological study could help various professionals prepare future school administrators for the challenging educational environment of the 2020s, post-COVID-19 Pandemic. The internship experience is crucial in preparing future principals (Winn et al., 2016). Incorporating the latest professional standards throughout the internship is a strategic way to ensure that future school leaders receive better training. In the study, which used the current NELP standards (2018), it was found that when candidates are provided with a variety of coherent, authentic field and/or clinical experiences within the framework of professional standards, school administrators are better prepared for the principalship than those without internship experience. State universities in North Carolina are effectively preparing aspiring school administrators to navigate the complexities of present-day educational settings. The NCPFP's paid internship component provides scholars with authentic opportunities for professional networking, crisis management, and the development of leadership practices grounded in real-world experience within school communities. This study affirms that intentional alignment between university preparation (through the lens of current NELP standards) and field-based internships not only strengthen the leadership pipeline but also advances the overall quality and sustainability of school leadership across the state.

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**TYLER KULP**, EdD, is an adjunct professor and recent graduate of the University of North Carolina Wilmington. He is the Associate Superintendent of schools in the Diocese of Wilmington. Email: [tylerkulp21@gmail.com](mailto:tylerkulp21@gmail.com)

**MICHELE PARKER**, PhD, is a Professor of Educational Leadership at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington. She earned her Ph.D. in Research, Statistics, and Evaluation from the University of Virginia and focuses her work on instructional technology and educational research methodology.

**YAN LIU**, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Educational Leadership at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. She earned her Ph.D. from Michigan State University and specializes in quantitative research on school leadership and effectiveness.

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