INTEGRATING LEARNING FROM PROBLEMS AND LEARNING FROM SUCCESS IN A PRINCIPAL PREPARATION PROGRAM

While learning from problematic events has become a major analytical lens for staff's collaborative learning at schools, successful practices have rarely been used for this purpose. The present qualitative study explored the perceptions of aspiring principals regarding the integration of learning from problems (LFP) and learning from successes (LFS) as a collaborative learning framework. Data was collected through reflective writings and focus groups. Data analysis revealed that aspiring principals attributed three main benefits to the integration of LFP and LFS: (1) seeing the whole picture; (2) exploring and making the most of school practices; and (3) drawing conclusions non-judgmentally. The integration of LFP and LFS as a framework for school-based collaborative learning is discussed, and implications are suggested.

Despite the recognized importance of principal preparation (Drago-Severson, Blum-Destefano, & Asghar, 2013; Hernandez, Roberts, & Menchaca, 2012), scholars and policy makers have recently been claiming that the existing preparation programs are out of touch with reality and fail to impart to their participants what it takes to successfully lead a school today (Kearney & Valadez, 2015; VanTuyle & Reeves, 2014). The available preparation programs are criticized for not producing qualified educational leaders who are capable of running schools successfully (Boyland, Lehman, & Sriver, 2015; Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012).

One of the main arguments against principal preparation programs is that the methods of teaching used are overly didactic and not sufficiently interactive. The programs lack high-quality learning opportunities and active student-centered instruction (Bartee, 2012; Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, La Pointe, & Orr, 2010). In particular, preparation programs are expected to involve collaborative learning, since today's leaders do not impose externally-conceived values but rather work to establish joint meanings and values that respect various cultural assets and voices. They lead from the center rather than from the top and concentrate on posing core questions rather than imposing predetermined solutions (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Schechter, 2013). In this context, collaborative learning in preparation programs is of significant importance, because a leader who is skilled in collaborative learning processes may serve as a group facilitator who explains the proceedings and moderates the discussion toward shared group action. Moreover, in line with the constructivist approach, which emphasizes the importance of learning in a mean-
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In meaningful context rather than abstract instruction out of context (Keaton & Bodie, 2011; Powell & Kalina, 2009), principal preparation programs are expected to engage students in learning that applies theoretical knowledge to practical situations (Glanz, 2016; Hallinger & Lu, 2013; Hattie, 2009).

In wake of the above-mentioned critics’ claims, many principal preparation programs have introduced initiatives that involve collaborative analysis of cases taken from day-to-day school-life reality. In this way, aspiring principals are engaged in collaborative learning processes which are grounded in real school situations. They do not learn decontextualized knowledge but rather actively link the theories they have learned to authentic situations (Weiler & Cray, 2012). However, in most programs, the collaborative learning from real school-life cases involves only learning from problems (LFP); namely, the cases discussed are characterized by difficulties, troubles, hitches, and failure (Bridges, 2012). Successful practices in realistic school-life cases are seldom considered to be appropriate material for collaborative learning (Duke, 2014). While LFP has become a major analytical lens in principal preparation programs worldwide (Mann, Reardon, Becker, Shakeshaft, & Bacon, 2011; Turnbull, Riley, & MacFarlane, 2013), learning from success (LFS), which is about learning from successful cases, has rarely been the lens for collaborative inquiry and growth (Schechter, 2011).

The common approach applied in collaborative learning in principal preparation programs, which deals predominantly with LFP, may be seen as unidimensional, covering only part of the wide range of school-life situations. Ignoring a considerable part of school leadership reality, namely the positive and successful practices, this approach may provide aspiring principals with a smaller number of strategies than they could have had at their disposal had they related to LFS as well. As an alternative to this prevalent framework for collaborative learning, this study seeks to explore a broader approach, where aspiring principals integrate LFP and LFS. To this end, the current study explored a group of 24 aspiring principals who integrated LFP and LFS during a major seminar in their preparation program. The perceptions of aspiring principals regarding this integration as a framework for collaborative learning were the focus of the study.

Theoretical Background

Learning from Problems (LFP)

LFP, which involves drawing lessons from past failed and problematic events, is widely used in a variety of fields (Barber, King, & Buchanan, 2015; Elder, 2015). Although problems and failures represent two different sorts of circumstances in organizational life, they both stimulate a conscious search for meaning, clearly signifying that there is learning to be done. Thus, scholars have advanced the notion of problem finding and problem solving.
that is proactive, analytical, and strategic, describing the problem as a domain for ongoing and progressive inquiry (Sroufe & Ramos, 2015).

As aforementioned, in recent years, principal preparation programs have introduced initiatives aimed at better preparing future school leaders, involving student-centered, authentic learning (Bartee, 2012; Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Weiler & Cray, 2012). As in other disciplines, retrospective learning—i.e. learning from past experiences—with reference to school administration has been associated with overcoming problems (Mann et al., 2011; Turnbull et al., 2013). Reconstructing and reorganizing professional knowledge generated by past experiences take place when groups confront problems and develop fitting solutions. Despite the gradual shift in the educational management literature from problem solving to problem finding, principals’ learning is still motivated by confronting complex problems that require active engagement and resolution (Duke, 2014; Gallagher, 2015).

While problems and failures can stimulate willingness to critique traditional working patterns and consider alternatives, they are also associated with responses of denial and avoidance (Ellis, Mendel, & Nir, 2006). Reviewing problems and failures is potentially threatening for practitioners as it tends to perpetuate the same defensive dynamics that may have contributed to these problems and failures in the first place, thus restricting authentic inquiry and possible change. Learning in collective forums is often characterized by defensive exchanges where members fail to express and test their assumptions and refrain from communication that may involve tension (Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012).

Learning from Success (LFS)

LFS focuses on a collaborative inquiry into future principals’ successful practices in order to uncover the implicit wisdom that made their successes possible. The major assumptions of the LFS approach are: (a) the expertise of principal trainees is a rich, barely tapped resource; (b) due to systemic bias toward learning from difficulties or problems, successful practices have rarely been the subject of study in leadership preparation; and (c) for the expertise underlying success to be tapped, it must undergo a collaborative learning process through which tacit knowledge is transformed into explicit shared knowledge, thus assisting learners in exploring the wisdom in their own practice. (Schechter, 2011, 2015; Shuman & Wilson, 2004).

The focus on positive aspects of principal candidates’ practices as an opportunity for learning and growth has philosophical grounding in the literature concerning appreciative inquiry (Whitney & Fredrickson, 2015) and positive organizational scholarship (Nilsson, 2015). Rather than focusing on deficit-based practices, these approaches focus on discovering what works well and how successes can generate a more positive course of human
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and organizational welfare. Whereas both appreciative inquiry and positive organizational scholarship search for “positive core practices” (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008) in an organization in order to develop generative capacities (e.g., resilience, wisdom, justice), LFS also focuses on the collaborative learning endeavor. Thus, the question arises whether pondering professional successes may facilitate a productive and sustained collaborative learning venue for educational environments which are dynamic and often-times unpredictable.

As aforementioned, organizations, including schools and staff members, have tended to learn from their past and current difficulties, while leaving their successes relatively unexamined. The professional literature has also tended to reinforce this pattern: indeed, when it did allude to LFS in organizations, it often focused on the problematic dynamics that may ensue from success. For example, researchers suggested that LFS: (a) often leads to actions that preserve the status quo and avoid risk taking (Ellis et al., 2006); (b) might induce self-assurance and even overconfidence in routines that were proven successful in the past (Gino & Pisano, 2011); (c) strengthens organizations’ homogeneity, thus maintaining the same historical operating procedures and the same personnel, impeding experimentation with organizational routines (Madsen & Desai, 2010); (d) rarely stimulates a conscious search for meaning (failure-to-ask-why-syndrome), and is processed, if at all, by “automatic pilot” (Ellis & Davidi, 2005); (e) produces only first-order learning, reducing the likelihood that organizations will respond to environmental change with a transformational response (Lundin, Öberg, & Josefsson, 2015); (f) might cause strategic inertia, inattentiveness, and isolation in the long run, thus increasing the probability of future problems (Baumard & Starbuck, 2005); and (g) provides little attention to the role that may have been played by environmental factors and random events, focusing disproportionately on current models or strategies (Gino & Pisano, 2011).

Without denying the validity of the above claims, under some circumstances the commonly-practiced selective inattention to successful practices prevents principal candidates from benefitting from the wealth of learning opportunities embedded in their own modes of action. The pros of practicing learning from successful events and processes are that it may heighten learners’ awareness of their own and others’ expertise and may begin to develop a refined awareness of the detailed ways in which such expertise is expressed in their work. This provides additional valid information concerning the connection between specifics and positive consequences which facilitates and enhances more accurate feedback in an atmosphere of outcome-based accountability (Michalsky & Schechter, 2013; Schechter & Michalsky, 2014).

A study (Schechter, 2008) that explored aspiring principals’ perceptions regarding LFS has revealed that they raised concerns regarding the applicability of this collaborative learning approach in their schools.

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They suspected that teachers would perceive the analysis of others' successes as a criticism of their own work or as a reflection on their own failures. Moreover, aspiring principals perceived the LFS process as an inquiry into colleagues' professional legitimacy which could lead to changes in power relations among the group members. Specifically, aspiring principals argued that the competitive atmosphere in the current era of imposed standards and accountability is a major factor in inhibiting inquiry-based learning as teachers are reluctant to share professional successes with colleagues. To complement that study, the current study explored aspiring principals' perceptions regarding the integration of LFP and LFS as a collaborative learning approach.

**Integrating LFP and LFS**

Since LFP and LFS both have advantages and disadvantages, strengths and weaknesses, it is useful to focus inquiry on both successful and problematic aspects of professional practices (Madsen & Desai, 2010). In Ellis and Davidi's (2005) study on two companies of soldiers taking a ground navigation course, it was found that the pace of participants' improvement in navigation exercises was significantly greater in the company employing balanced reviews (i.e., contemplating both problematic and successful events) than in the company employing unbalanced event reviews (i.e., contemplating only problematic events). In addition, this inquiry revealed that the balanced reviews had a positive effect on LFP as well (Ellis et al., 2006).

The available research concerning the integration of both LFP and LFS in the realm of education is quite limited. In a recent study, Schechter and Michalsky (2014) made a pioneering attempt to integrate collaborative learning from problematic practices and successful ones into the teacher education realm. The study compared the exclusive use of LFP versus the integrated use of LFP and LFS in physics teachers' preparatory programs. Results indicated that when prospective teachers contemplated both problematic and successful experiences in their teaching (during their internships) using a distinct five-step collaborative learning format (Schechter, Sykes, & Rosenfeld, 2008), they exhibited larger gains in pedagogical content knowledge (i.e., comprehending and teaching) as well as in their sense of self-efficacy (i.e., personal science-teaching efficacy and science-teaching outcome expectancies) compared to prospective teachers who contemplated only problematic experiences.

The current study explored a group of aspiring principals who integrated learning from both problematic and successful situations in a major seminar included in their preparation program. In particular, the current study investigated aspiring principals' perceptions regarding the integration of LFP and LFS as an optional framework for collaborative learning.
Research Context

This study was conducted within a principal preparation program in Israel. All seven preparation programs in Israel, all public, follow the same curriculum and are supervised and operated under the instructional guidance of the Capstone Institute that was appointed by the Ministry of Education to spearhead school principals’ development. Moreover, the Capstone Institute examines all candidates for all preparation programs through identical criteria. The level of prerequisites has been raised in recent years, and admission has become more difficult. Each year about 350 students are accepted out of 1200 applicants.

The primary role of Israeli school principals as articulated by the Capstone Institute is to serve as instructional leaders in order to improve the education and learning of all students (Capstones, 2008). This instructional leadership approach has become the overall framework for all principal preparation programs in Israel. The core element of the program is applying experiential learning, aiming to develop a leadership and management orientation through shared and collaborative pedagogical methods. Overall, principal preparation in Israel lasts one academic year, consisting of 250 hours of academic study and 150 hours of internship. Internship takes place in host schools over the course of one year during which prospective principals receive guidance from experienced school principals. The internship aims to provide interns with a clear picture of all the principal’s duties and responsibilities as well as with the knowledge and skills facilitating effective leadership.

Method

Study Design

The present study was qualitative in nature in order to facilitate the exploration of the meanings that aspiring principals attach to the integration of LFP and LFS as a collaborative learning framework (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2016).

Participants

The participants of this study were 24 students studying in a principal preparation program in Israel. These 24 aspiring principals (18 females, 6 males) had 8–26 years of teaching experience ($M = 17$) and worked in elementary schools ($n = 12$), middle schools ($n = 3$), and high schools ($n = 9$) located in five of Israel’s six school districts. They all had master’s degrees as a prerequisite for being accepted into the program. For ethical reasons, all participants were informed that participation is voluntary and that they could quit participating in the study at any time. They
were assured of confidentiality (i.e., pseudo-names were assigned to all) and were asked to provide written consent based on understanding the research objective.

Procedure

The integration of LFP and LFS was the dominant learning approach in the major seminar of this principal preparation program. It took place throughout 12 three-hour sessions, once every two weeks. The instructor of this seminar was Author 1. We utilized the five-step collaborative learning format (Schechter et al., 2008), presented linearly although its steps are interrelated and interdependent, as follows: (1) identify a problematic/successful experience or event for collaborative learning (i.e., the trainee is asked to provide a concise description of the situation that transpired before and after the occurrence of the event selected for analysis); (2) reconstruct the concrete actions that led to the outcomes under discussion (i.e., the trainee is repeatedly challenged to go beyond standard professional jargon and reconnect to the specific actions that led to the problematic/successful outcome); (3) identify critical turning points (i.e., the trainee breaks down the path toward problematic/successful outcomes into chronologically-ordered stages, marked by turning points or key milestones); (4) formulate principles of action based on the problematic/successful event (i.e., the trainee creates principles of action based on the details of each specific event, albeit general enough to be implemented in other educational contexts); and (5) identify unresolved issues for further inquiry (i.e., issues for further study are verbalized and noted, assuring the open-ended nature of the learning process).

Participants collectively deliberated on problematic and successful events that occurred during their internships or in their schools. Generally, three different participants analyzed their problematic and successful experiences at each session. In order to learn about the patterns of interaction and mutual influence between LFP and LFS, participants alternated between analyzing problematic instances first and successful ones afterwards, and vice versa. Using the first step in the five-step reflective format for LFP, the participant spoke first, followed by peers’ reflections, and finally by those of the instructor. They proceeded to use self-reflection, peer reflection, and instructor reflection for each of the four ensuing steps until completing all five. Then they repeated all five steps in the same sequence for LFS.

Data Collection

Data were collected both through reflective writings and focus groups. Study participants were requested to write a reflective journal after each collaborative analysis of both problematic and successful practices. These reflective journals involved pondering what had been learned through
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delving into the collaborative learning experience in great depth (Fernandez, Chelliah, & Halim, 2015). Guiding questions were offered, such as: What did you learn from the inquiry into problems and successes on the emotional and cognitive levels? What additional insights did you gain following later reflection? How can you use what you have learned in the session to enhance your leadership and administrative development and practices?

While participants’ reflective writing enabled them to derive additional meaning from the sessions (Foster, 2015), it also enabled us, the researchers, to explore their perceptions regarding the integration of LFP and LFS as a collaborative learning framework (Northfell & Edgar, 2014). Each participant was required to submit at least three reflective papers. In total, we had 81 reflective papers. Their average length was a page and a half.

In addition, two focus groups were held. They were semi-structured which “allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 2009, p. 90). The key questions were preplanned, but the focus groups were also conversational with questions flowing from previous responses when possible. Questions examined the interplay of LFS and LFP, both implicitly (e.g., What was meaningful to you in these sessions? Why?) and explicitly (e.g., How are LFS and LFP helpful for your professional development? How will you use them as a school principal?). Focus groups were audiotaped for later transcription and analysis with participants’ consent. Focus groups generally lasted two hours.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was a four-stage process – condensing, coding, categorizing, and theorizing. First, the necessary sorting and condensing were done (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014) by the researchers who sought out the relevant portions of data based on the research questions and conceptual framework. At the second stage, coding, each segment of data (utterance) was coded according to the aspect it represented (Tracy, 2013). This stage, in contrast to the previous one, was data-driven and not theory-driven as the researchers did not use a-priori codes but rather inductive ones developed by direct examination of the perspectives articulated by participants (Flick, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). After having captured the essence of utterances in the second and the third stages, categorizing consisted of assembling similar utterances in clusters in order to generalize their meanings and derive categories. Finally, in the theorizing stage, we aimed to reach a conceptual construct of the categories derived in the previous stage and to see how they were interconnected and influenced each other as parts of one abstract construct (Richards & Morse, 2013).

In a qualitative exploration, researchers must pay attention to how their backgrounds and personal experiences inform the theoretical and
methodological perceptions concerning the inquiry. As the researchers of this study, we come from different backgrounds: one of us was a school principal for 17 years and currently is an educational leadership researcher and the second gained extensive experience in educational leadership research. Our joint work, which includes ongoing mutual reflection, allowed us to become more aware of the conceptual and methodological issues pertaining to the current research. Specifically, since reflective journals have been recognized as an important aspect of qualitative research (Etherington, 2004; Ortlipp, 2008), we wrote and shared our reflective journals throughout the study to ensure critical thinking.

Findings

The goal of this study was to explore aspiring principals’ perceptions regarding the integration of LFP and LFS as a collaborative learning framework. Findings emerging from qualitative data analysis yielded three main benefits that aspiring principals attached to the integration of LFP and LFS: (1) seeing the whole picture; (2) exploring and making the best of school practices; and (3) drawing conclusions non-judgmentally.

Seeing the Whole Picture

Aspiring principals’ utterances revealed that they thought the integration of LFP and LFS was a collaborative learning framework which facilitates seeing the whole picture. They explained that it provided a broad view on the full range of school performance. This notion was mentioned by study participants.

Barbara, for example, who has 19 years of teaching experience, said during a focus-group session that at the elementary school where she works as a year coordinator, drawing conclusions is part of the corporate culture. However, they often target failures, trying to design curriculum, programs and activities to overcome students’ shortcomings rather than focusing on what they are doing well. Barbara claimed that the integration of LFP and LFS expanded the teachers’ holistic perspective:

We regularly hold meetings to draw conclusions from what we’ve done. However, naturally our focus is on what didn’t work well. We assume that the things that worked well are OK, and our attention is needed for what went wrong. Now I’ve learned that drawing conclusions from the things that were successful may benefit us no less than drawing conclusions from undesired results. Thus I believe that the combination of learning from problems and learning from success provides us with a more holistic mode of drawing conclusions. The only problem is that success is not unequivocal. When our school gets high scores on the national exams, for example, the parents are satisfied, other schools envy
us, but our teachers complain about the hard work they put in to produce these results.

Barbara argued that success is sometimes a tricky concept. However, she considered the integration of LFP and LFS as providing "a more holistic way" to examine school life. According to her, when teachers do something successfully they rarely analyze its roots. In this way, they do not recognize the factors that enabled the success, missing an opportunity to identify possible enablers of future successes. The integration of LFP and LFS allowed them to see a broader picture of their school.

Similarly, Lisa, an assistant principal in a middle school with 16 years of teaching experience, said that the integration of LFP and LFS facilitates multidimensional collaborative learning:

The approach of learning from both problems and successes which was absolutely new to me and also really significant for me. We do things successfully, and we don’t learn from them how to succeed in our following tasks. Not everyone could comfortably hear about others’ success; however, I acquired an important tool here of deriving lessons from previous success to use when I encounter future challenges. Now I understand that learning only from unsuccessful processes and events is a one-dimensional approach which is not enough for the complex school reality.

Claiming that "not everyone could comfortably hear about others’ success,” Lisa indicated that in a competitive environment, teachers might perceive the analysis of others’ successes as implicit criticism of their own work or as a reflection on their own failures. They would see the success of their “competitors” as a threat, thus finding it difficult to appreciate and learn from them. However, Lisa perceived LFP alone as “a one-dimensional approach,” which misses other dimensions of school reality. For her, integrating LFP with LFS provides a more appropriate setting for collaborative learning in a complex school reality.

Exploring and Making the Best of School Practices

Analysis of the current data suggests that prospective principals perceived the integration of LFP with LFS as helpful for distinguishing between practices that should be replaced versus those that should be replicated. When a school makes a transition from its current state to some desired future state, organizational transformation is required. However, the practices that were effective in this process should be recognized and preserved. The integration of LFP with LFS is helpful in the context of this diagnosis. This notion was mentioned by 11 study participants.

For example, Karen, a consultant in a high school with 22 years of teaching experience explained:

Since we are committed to continuous improvement, we usually...
look for possible changes. We assume that in order to perform better, we have to modify our practices. However, we sometimes don’t recognize which effective practices should not be changed. I’m afraid that learning from success is something that creates euphoria. Yet the two different methods of learning from success and learning from problems complement each other because they show us not only the things that we need to do differently but also the good things we have to continue doing.

While the framework of LFP, which is focused on the parts of the organization that do not function properly, leads to ongoing changes, LFS sheds light on practices that should be remembered and learned from. Karen expressed her concern that LFS creates euphoria. However, seeing LFP and LFS as balancing each other, she interpreted their integration as a desirable combination of changing ineffective practices and maintaining or refining effective ones.

David, an elementary school teacher with 17 years of experience, said that despite his schools’ high scores in the national evaluation of school climate, he did not see it as a school that handles climate issues properly. During a focus group session he recounted how the integration of LFP and LFS provided him with a new point of view:

The national evaluation of elementary schools includes a school climate assessment. Our school’s results are very high in this area. But I know our school, and I don’t think the situation is so satisfying. However, for me the integration of learning from both success and problems, which we’ve learned here, meant that although I don’t believe the high grade on the school climate report, we probably do several things well after all, and we have to shed light on them and keep them going. We mustn’t only seek improvement but also be able to point to the right moves we make and continue repeating them.

David believed that his school climate was less positive than that reflected in the picture which emerged from the national evaluation scores. By integrating LFP and LFS, he understood that in addition to the things that needed improvement, his school apparently does function well in ways that should be recognized, appreciated, learned from, and preserved.

**Drawing Conclusions Non-Judgmentally**

One more benefit of integrating LFP and LFS expressed by aspiring principals is the opportunity to draw conclusions more positively. While LFP may involve a claim that someone has done something wrong which may in turn lead to defensiveness, denial, or shifting the blame away, LFS enables learning that does not entail accusations of wrongdoing. This benefit was mentioned by eight study participants. For example,
Robert, a high school teacher in his 15th year, said:

In our school, we regularly draw conclusions from various events and occurrences. It’s part of our work culture. However, this also often means pointing a finger at those who are to blame. We aim to draw conclusions, but we also look for the person who is responsible for the blunder. If we would draw conclusions not only when something goes wrong but also when something works properly, the meaning of drawing conclusions could be different for us. It could be done in a businesslike way without the unpleasant feelings that accompany it as we’ve experienced in the past.

Robert’s school regularly devoted time to post-action reviews in order to improve future performance. However, this also meant determining who was at fault. One may claim that if people are not blamed for their failures, nothing will ensure that they try as hard as possible to do their best in the future. Yet Robert believed that ensuring high standards for performance could be done even without determining who is to blame. Therefore he argued that the integration of LFP and LFS, where drawing lessons is motivated not only by problems but also by successes, may sever the unnecessary link between conclusion-drawing and discovering who was responsible for what did not work properly. This, to his mind, would facilitate learning which is “done in a businesslike way.”

Kimberley, an assistant principal of an elementary school with 14 years of teaching experience, described in her reflective writing how she implemented the integration of LFS and LFP while providing feedback following her observation of a lesson by novice teachers. She recounted: “I understood that learning from the successful part of the lesson observed is really important. Learning from what the teacher did well complements the insights about what didn’t work well during the lesson.” She added that the result was a change of atmosphere in the feedback conversation:

My new approach also changed the tone and mood of the feedback meeting. I always opened the feedback with something positive. But I always did it because it helps put the teacher at ease and also, out of courtesy, because I didn’t want to be purely critical. Now, when I don’t focus only on the teachers’ blunders, but rather pay real attention to her strengths as well, the whole nature of the feedback changes. It’s much more relaxed.

Kimberley believed that feedback should start off on a positive note. However, she considered it as stemming from politeness so as not to be totally judgmental and critical. The integration of LFS and LFB, which led to feedback relating not only to the teacher’s difficulties but also to her success, created a “much more relaxed” atmosphere.

Robert, mentioned above, saw the integration of LFP and LFS as enabling collaborative learning which is “done in a businesslike way,” and Kimberley saw it as facilitating feedback in a “much more relaxed” atmo-
sphere. Both, then, perceived the integration of LFP and LFS as enabling more positive conclusion-drawing which does not necessarily involve focusing on guilt and failure.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine the perceptions of prospective principals regarding the integration of LFP and LFS as an alternative to the common framework for collaborative learning. Qualitative data analysis showed that aspiring principals attributed three main benefits to the integration of LFP and LFS. The first benefit—seeing the whole picture—may be seen as representing more holistic collaborative learning which provides a broader view on the full range of school practices. The second benefit—exploring and making the best of school practices—may be seen as representing more accurate collaborative learning which enables educators to recognize and preserve effective practices. The third benefit—drawing conclusions non-judgmentally—may be seen as representing less daunting collaborative learning which is done in a matter-of-fact manner.

As reviewed above, the literature about the integration of LFP and LFS is meager. Schechter and Michalsky (2014) found that in teacher training, integration of LFP and LFS brings about better results than LFP alone. It was not clear, however, why this was so. Findings of this study suggest that the superiority of the integration of LFP and LFS stems from three roots as it enables learning from experience which is: (1) more holistic, (2) more accurate, and (3) less daunting.

In the context of principal preparation, our findings should be seen from two perspectives. First, as mentioned above, the ways in which existing preparation programs train principals are a source of concern among various stakeholders (Anderson & Reynolds, 2015; Wallace Foundation, 2016). Researchers and field personnel have criticized principal preparation programs for failing to adequately train prospective educational leaders for their roles, claiming that these programs do not produce qualified principals who are capable of running schools successfully (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen 2007; Schechter, 2011; Williams, 2015). To prepare aspiring principals for their future roles more effectively, some preparation programs employ collaborative analysis of cases taken from school reality (Weiler & Cray, 2012). Findings of the current study suggest that collaborative learning which analyzes cases of problematic situations only may be insufficient. The integration of LFP and LFS may be a satisfactory framework for collaborative learning in principal preparation programs which is more holistic, more accurate, and less daunting than studying from LFP alone. Second, collaborative learning in principal preparation programs is important as today’s leaders have to abandon the heroic management stance of knowing all, being all, and doing all. Instead of providing the right answers, they are obligated to
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search for the right questions through a collaborative process (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Schechter, 2013). Aspiring principals who engage in collaborative learning during their preparation programs may also make collaborative learning a prominent characteristic of their educational leadership, sharing responsibilities and enabling individuals within the school to take turns leading. According to this study's findings, if aspiring principals learn to integrate LFP and LFS in collaborative learning, they may acquire a more holistic, more accurate, and less daunting way of achieving this. Reflection on both problematic and successful pedagogical and administrative experiences can foster effective learning and interpretation systems as opportunities where educators can ponder and cross-validate different perceptions of the same data. These inter-negotiations of beliefs and opinions regarding both problematic and successful professional practices may nurture multiple perspectives, consequently stimulating more holistic insights concerning schoolwork. Thus, switching cognitive gears between LFP and LFS can be an important mechanism for better sense-making of school experiences (Ellis et al., 2006; Schechter, 2008).

From a learning theory perspective, the integration of LFS and LFP can prompt comparison and categorization which are “two of the core mechanisms that underlie human learning, understanding, and reasoning” (Kurtz, Boukrina, & Gentner, 2013, p. 1303). One of the complexities of collaborative LFS in the context of school leadership is that “success” is sometimes a matter of perspective. Educators do not necessarily share the same beliefs and values concerning what counts as success. As a result, one educator’s perceived success may be another’s perceived problem. Moreover, success is always measured in relation to particular organizational goals. Since school leaders must address multiple goals simultaneously, the achievement of some of these goals is almost always accomplished at the expense of others. In addition, school goals are typically advocated by interested community members and other stakeholders; therefore the goals that keep some constituents happy will disappoint and frustrate others (Schechter, 2011). Integrating LFP with LFS enables comparison, categorization, and exploration, leading to a learning process that can promote deep relational learning and the development of more complex and holistic explanations (Kurtz et al., 2013).

Through analyzing professional problems and successes, aspiring principals transformed their individual pedagogical expertise into a shared knowledge base for the benefit of other aspiring principals. Moreover, collective analysis of successful and problematic practices enabled these aspiring principals not only to generate new meanings but also to confirm and circle back to existing behaviors and beliefs (Danowitz, Hanappi-Egger, & Hofmann, 2009). Confirming existing behaviors and beliefs in the collective arena can provide a legitimacy assurance to certain desirable professional practices within a particular school setting.

Aspiring principals claimed that integrating LFS into their collab-
orative learning was different from what they were trained to do—that is, focusing on deficiencies and trying to correct them. Interestingly, this type of thought is similarly found in principals’ and teacher leaders’ assertions (Schechter, 2013), strongly suggesting that focusing on eradicating problems has been a major impediment to upholding a continuous process of LFS. These results may imply that in the current general atmosphere of high-stakes standards and “quick fixes,” with its deficit-based learning orientation, integrating collective learning from successful practices with learning from problematic experiences would be an extremely difficult endeavor even in the relatively safe environment of a principal preparation program.

Without denying the importance of focusing on problems as a way to learn and change, field-based experiences can provide prospective principals with opportunities to collaboratively observe and analyze successful practices. In this regard, contemplation of successful events may lay the groundwork for contemplation of problematic events in both university-based and field-based reflective processes. Learners can benefit from initiating learning processes that focus on successes as a stepping-stone toward developing the capacity to deliberate productively on authentic problems. Initial LFP, even in a relatively safe practice space (e.g., university-based lessons), can be fatal to any collaborative learning process, whereas initiating an early LFS process may provide the resources and experiences needed to foster productive future learning from authentic problematic events (Schechter, 2011).

Based on the findings of this study, exploring the integration of LFP and LFS in other stages of school principals’ professional development is recommended. In many cases the school principals of tomorrow start out as today’s assistant principals and teacher leaders who hold managerial responsibility for staff (e.g., English department coordinators); for an aspect of the school’s work (e.g., social activities coordinators); or of the student body (e.g., fourth-grade coordinators). Serving in these roles may be a preliminary landmark along the professional path to school leadership. Thus, integration of LFP and LFS should be explored as a framework for professional development of assistant principals and mid-level school leaders, preparing them for their future roles as principals.

Forasmuch as the notion that novice school principals should optimally receive professional support at the outset has recently gained wide recognition, the integration of LFP and LFS should be investigated as a conceptual framework for implementation in programs designed to support new principals, providing them with a perspective through which they can better understand their everyday reality and find effective strategies for creating well-functioning schools. The integration of LFP and LFS may be explored among principals even after their first few years on the job since they need to continuously enhance their skills and consolidate their leadership knowledge. Even among highly experienced school leaders, the integration of LFP and LFS may be significant in renewing open-
ness to experimentation and attentiveness to others’ input, as a preventive measure against falling into inertia or becoming overconfident in routines that have proven to be successful in the past.

Compared with prior studies, this study provides new data on prospective principals’ perceptions regarding the integration of LFP and LFS as an alternative framework for collaborative learning. However, further research is required since the findings were collected in a particular context so that their cross-cultural validity was not demonstrated. Replicating this study elsewhere in various socio-cultural contexts will enable generalization of the findings to broader populations, possibly substantiating their international validity. Moreover, a comparison of this study’s conceptual framework according to participants’ characteristics (e.g., gender, education, or experience) and school characteristics (e.g., age level or socioeconomic status) was beyond the scope of the current study. Further research should address this issue. Finally, it would also be useful to conduct longitudinal studies, including repeated data collection among the same participants, in order to explore whether the integration of collaborative LFP and LFS in a preparation program contributes to novice principals as they assume educational leadership positions.

References


Integrating Learning from Problems


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