Proposal for PhD in Education Internship

Internship with The Pact Plus Project

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1. **Proposed Internship and Objectives**

**Background**

The role of school leaders encompasses a range of skills from promoting and supporting a vision for student academic success to implementing a positive school culture. School leaders must be responsive to a range of stakeholders. The stakeholders consist of students, teachers, parents, administrators, and the community who have direct or indirect involvement in the school. Through their survey of school leaders, Barnett, Shoho, and Oleszewski (2012) found that the challenges most reported by school leaders were (a) managing needs of students, personnel, parents, and the general public, (b) addressing and navigating multiple education hierarchies (e.s., building level, central office, state), (c) managing curriculum and instructional programs, and (d) using schoolwide data that effects classroom instruction and student achievement. The challenges that typically get addressed are the ones that affect daily operations in a school (i.e., managerial tasks) (Robinson, Lylod, & Rowe, 2008).

With these competing priorities, school leaders may find it difficult to prioritize instruction (Kwan & Walker, 2008). Consequently, instructional duties fall near the bottom on the priority list of day to day activities. This action can result in school leaders missing opportunities to develop the required skills, knowledge, and confidence to guide teachers with instructional initiatives. As a result, the school leader may not have the capacity to introduce school-wide instructional initiatives.

**Supporting the Change Needed for Schoolwide Initiatives**

School leaders need to understand what changes must occur when a school is applying a new schoolwide initiative. It is crucial to have a well-designed map to support the change (Crow, 2009). Specifically, a coherent design is needed for implementing, monitoring, and supporting new initiatives. School leaders should focus on three major components to support the change needed for schoolwide initiatives (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; McCombs, 2003).

First and foremost, it is essential that school leaders address the stakeholder’s mindset that is part of the change. A stakeholder’s mindset can be defined as an individual’s ability to accept and value the change, build a positive rapport and relationship with other individuals, and offer solutions within a new change (Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). Within a school, values can be interpreted as the influence of a stakeholder’s belief. The stakeholder’s belief is their overall perception that is engrained in their thinking (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). For example, in a school this might be portrayed as a stakeholder’s belief that “all kids can learn.” A stakeholder’s actions (volunteering for PD, collaborating with peers, implementing new strategies) should display a belief that with the right support and strategies, all students are capable of learning.

School leaders need keen skills to recognize and change the sometimes negative mindset of stakeholders. School leaders should have the skills to (a) talk with teachers to promote reflection and make suggestions, (b) encourage continuous learning, (c) emphasize the study of continuous teaching and learning, and (d) apply the principles of adult learning, growth, and development to staff development (Blase & Blasé, 2000). The mindset, whether it is positive or negative, can affect academic achievement of students and hamper systemic change. For example, if a stakeholder has a positive mindset about their students they will likely look for traditional and nontraditional strategies to support students’ academic achievement. If a stakeholder has a negative mindset about the capabilities of their students, they may disregard effective initiatives. Mindset is one factor of many that can hinder systematic change in a school.

 A school is a complex, ever changing environment that interacts with societal systems (McCombs, 2003). Stakeholders develop a set of beliefs about school from their personal experiences that translate into their own viewpoints of how a school should function (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2013). Put another way, to influence a stakeholder’s mindset, the school leader must have the skills to interpret their beliefs and how those beliefs manifest in the dynamic system of the school (Dweck, 2012). This allows the school leader to decide which degree of support a stakeholder might need to change their mindset. To address the mindset of stakeholder’s, transformational leadership has been practiced (Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). This leadership style can challenge individuals’ thinking and aid stakeholders in understanding their role in supporting change.

Next, in introducing a schoolwide initiative, a school leader must be able to clearly communicate and explain to stakeholders what changes will occur within the process. The ability to communicate the change cycle effectively and rationally will decrease stress that can occur in change. The change cycle is defined as a map that depicts the human experience at each stage of change – all changes, big or small (Fullan, 2006). Within a new schoolwide initiative, the change cycle can be seen in a clear systematic process. First, the stakeholders may show signs of emotions of anger (internally/externally). This behavior can be displayed with them saying phrases like, “*Another initiative. How am I supposed to do this and teach?*” Then, the stakeholders will move from anger to confusion, asking why there is a need for the initiative. In the school, you might hear phrases like, “*I have been teaching for X years… I already know what to do.*” Then, the stakeholders will transition to understanding the need for the initiative. This can be displayed by stakeholders volunteering to be on committees for the initiatives, or seeking out PD. Lastly, the stakeholders will accept the initiative. Evidence of acceptance can be seen in teacher’s daily instruction (Fullan, 2006). School leaders must remember that the change cycle occurs differently based on the pace of the stakeholder.

 It is important that school leaders have the capability to maneuver their school through the change cycle when introducing a new initiative. When school leaders can foresee the cycles with stakeholder’s change, they can provide the necessary resources to encourage the change. Foreshadowing this cycle will support a smoother transition with a new schoolwide initiative.

Finally, to encourage systemic change, school leaders must get buy-in from as many stakeholders as possible and offer all stakeholders opportunities for ownership within the initiative. When implementing new initiatives in a school, several issues arise, (a) stakeholders encounter organizational conflict, (b) they usually are attempting new practices, and (c) stakeholders are taking on extra work by engaging with colleagues in planning, implementing, and evaluating improvement initiatives (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). School leaders need a large part of the staff to buy-in to combat these issues. One action to encourage buy-in from the staff is presenting the data to justify a need for the initiative to offer clarity for stakeholders. This practice will foster support and involvement from all stakeholders (Dweck, 2012).

To give opportunities for all stakeholders to establish ownership in new initiatives, a school leader must provide an avenue to get them involved in the initiatives. This can translate into stakeholders leading groups and workshops, mentoring novice teachers, attending PD, and collaborating with their peers or content teams (Muijs & Harris, 2007). Not only does this build stakeholders’ confidence within themselves, but it allows schoolwide initiatives to become part of the instructional culture of the school.

**Internship Objective**

Through this internship, I will apply research techniques used in program evaluation. In particular, I will complete tasks that help me realize the role that school administrators play in fostering schoolwide literacy models. The proposed internship is an opportunity to work with Dr. Jade Wexler, at the University of Maryland, on her Federally-funded model demonstration grant, Pact-Plus (Promoting Adolescents’ Comprehension of Text) project. Pact Plus is a tiered approach to improve reading among sixth through eighth grade students with disabilities in public schools. The project aims to (a) improve reading achievement and literacy-related outcomes, and (b) aid educators in developing a model for implementing research-based practices for students with disabilities in middle school. The internship will focus on the following research questions:

* What administrative actions result in successful school-wide adoption of new initiative?
* What are barriers that administrators face that inhibit successful schoolwide adoption of a new initiative?

I am now considering designing my dissertation studies around program evaluation of reading program design in a public-school setting. I expect this internship to foster a deeper understanding of the complexities that are involved when implementing a program in a school.

1. **Proposed Activities and Products**

**Activity 1**

I will attend all Adolescent Literacy Team Meetings for the project. In the meeting, I will take notes that outline the purpose of the meeting and what procedures and supports are being discussed with Pact Plus coaches. I will attend professional development given to the teachers by the coaches.

**Activity 2**

I will conduct informal observations with the Pact Plus coach. The purpose of the informal observations is to observe the teacher’s implementation of Pact Plus strategies. I will use my journal notes as my observation tool. The data collected from the observations will be used to compare what was observed in the classroom, data from the focus group, and interview notes with school leaders. This action will allow me to gain insight into understanding the barriers that school leaders encounter and are required to overcome to implement successful school-wide initiatives. I will attend the coach’s reflective debriefing with teachers. I will listen for patterns and challenges that teacher’s encounter, which was not mentioned in the focus group. The data may result in alternatives for school leaders with program implementation.

**Activity 3**

I will collect information from a focus group of teachers. The focus group will be comprised of teachers who range from novice teachers to experienced teachers with more than seven years instructing. I will attempt to have teachers that instruct in all core content areas. To facilitate this meeting, I will have anywhere from eight to fifteen teachers in the focus group. The focus group will last for forty-five minutes. I will facilitate the meeting and with IRB approval use an audio recorder to capture relevant information shared in the focus group. The questions used to provide this focus group are aligned to the proposal.

**Activity 4**

This activity will involve interviewing school leaders. The school leader is defined as any individual who is involved with working with and guiding teachers toward improving instructional practices in the classroom. The interview will be in a secluded area and last about twenty-five minutes. The interview questions will be open-ended that target at understanding the barriers that school leaders encounter with the adoption of a new initiative, specifically Pact Plus. I will also develop questions that aim at understanding the planning process needed from school leaders with new initiatives. I will take informal notes during the interview to record my data.

**Products**

At the completion of the internship, I will present my findings related to the major project questions with a presentation to the site-supervisor. The presentation will be written and oral. The presentation will include lessons learned from the internship.

During my experience in the internship, I will use a reflection log. This log will allow me to interpret and review my thoughts during the internship. The content in the log will focus around my interpretations about the systems and patterns I observe in the internship.

**3.0 Role of the Supervisor**

The supervisor will:

* Meet weekly with me to discuss progress in the internship.
* Review and give feedback on products during internship.
* Evaluate final presentation and products.

**4.0 Work Schedule**

The proposed work schedule ranges over a semester. I will work for a minimum of 100 hours for the three-credit internship.

**5.0 Evaluation Procedures**

The evaluation for this internship will be pass/fail based upon successful completion of assigned internship activities and products.

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