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These manuscripts have been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the International Council of Professors of Educational Leadership as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school leadership and K-12 education.

## From the Editors

You've been waiting patiently and here it is just in time for the holiday season: The Fall 2022 issue of *ELR*! This issue brings you 18 outstanding articles on a variety of leadership topics for both higher education and P-12, including research related to preparation programs, instructional practices, and student needs in various contexts. Once again, we want to thank our faithful reviewers for all their work this year to assure we continue to provide our readers with quality research on topics shaping our field.

As always, I (Ken) want to thank my associate editors, Dr. Casey Graham-Brown and Dr. Sandra Harris, for all their help in the review and decision-making processes. I also want to thank Dr. Brad Bizzell for his leadership regarding the entire body of ICPEL publications. He is truly a gift to the ICPEL membership and *ELR*, and I am incredibly grateful to count his as a friend and colleague.

Enjoy the issue and we look forward to beginning work on the 2023 issue in just a few weeks! Until then, we wish you and yours a most wonderful (and restful!) holiday season.

Sincerely,

J. Kenneth Young, Editor  
Casey Graham-Brown, Associate Editor  
Sandra Harris, Associate Editor

# A Systematic Review of Mindfulness in School Principals

**Jeana M. Partin**

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*Research regarding the practice of leaders' mindfulness has increased over the past several years. Emphasis on principals' mindfulness practices helped educational leaders become stronger during these uncertain and stressful times. Specifically, researching how principals use mindfulness in a school setting advances educational leadership by exploring this relationship. This systematic review aimed to understand how principals use mindful practices in their schools and relationships with their stakeholders. Attributes of mindfulness used in their leadership practices were explored to influence ways to enhance educational leadership training. Fourteen peer-reviewed research studies from 2010-2021 were reviewed. There were five key themes identified related to a principal's use of mindfulness: (a) school organization, (b) decision-making, (c) well-being, (d) leadership attributes, and (e) student success. This article concluded by discussing the key findings and suggestions to guide future research on principals' mindfulness.*

**Keywords:** well-being, mindfulness, principal, organizational trust, decision-making

Over the past few decades, the term “mindfulness” has become well-known in various aspects of society. New mindfulness-based mobile apps such as Headspace and Fitbit’s new Mindful Method program help individuals pursue the benefits of mindful living and practices. Mindfulness is the cultivation of the ability to pay attention to the present moment non-judgmentally, be self-aware, observe, and accept one’s unaltered thoughts, sensations, and emotions (Day & Gregory, 2017). Research specific to the practice of leader mindfulness has increased over the past ten years. Professional fields across disciplines have implemented mindfulness-based stress reduction programs to help leaders face difficult decisions (Mahfouz, 2018; Wells, 2013). This trend has also seen an increased emphasis on school principals. Schools have faced uncertain times due to Covid, accountability, and the need for trauma-informed pedagogy and practice (Huber & Helm, 2020). However, to date, education research has not focused on how mindfulness might advance and strengthen education leadership in relation to stakeholders (Brion & Gullo, 2020; Hoy et al., 2006; Mahfouz & Richardson, 2020). Therefore, this study aimed to understand how principals might use mindful practices in their schools and in their relationships with stakeholders.

Educational administrative decision-making requires more than the mechanical application of existing rules and regulations at various school and school-related policies (Hoy et al., 2006). School leaders’ duties consist of complex decisions and thoughtful processes rather than merely possessing and carrying out specific technical tasks to ensure effective and efficient organizational operations management (Sergiovanni, 2009). Twenty-first-century K-12 principals are expected to make high-level professional decisions and respond to difficult, sometimes tense situations throughout the school year. The following systematic review examined the literature on how the use of mindfulness by principals influenced their daily practice. The research question guiding the study was as follows: What does the research in the last ten years find about principals’ use of mindfulness?

## Methods

Research material included in this study focused on principals’ use of mindfulness in a school setting. The review included scholarly peer-reviewed articles from 2010-2021 and seminal works related to educational leaders’ decision-making and mindfulness. In this study, administrators included principals who work in urban, suburban, and rural geographic areas, serving students from diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic neighborhoods. There were no restrictions on articles that included administrators regarding gender, race, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, or sexual orientation.

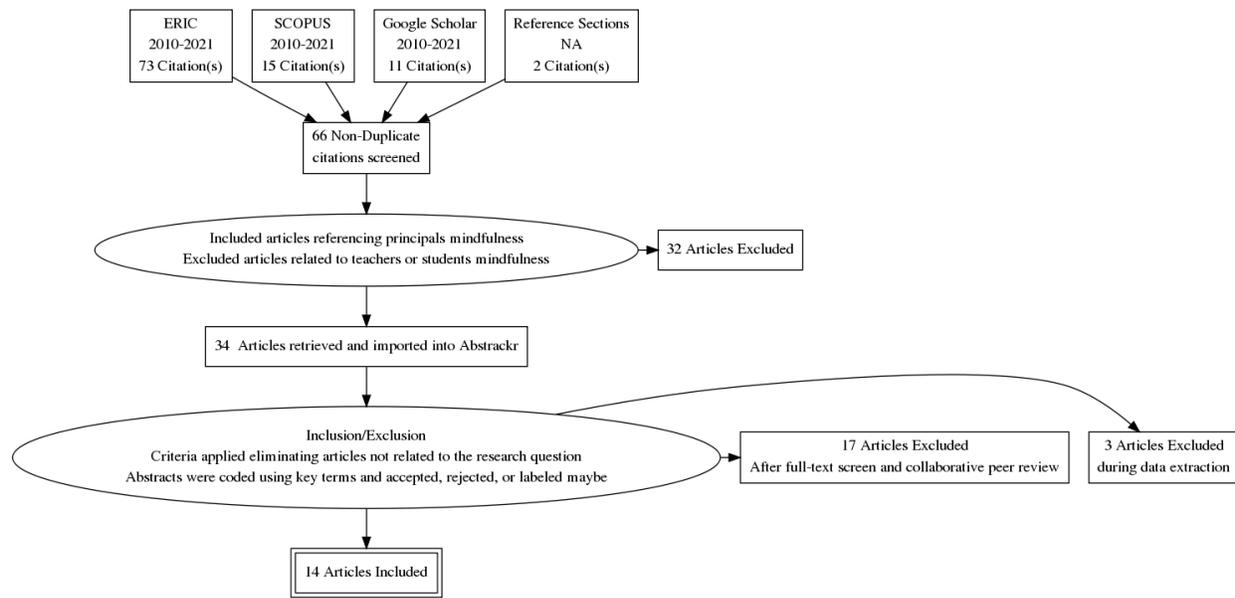
Computerized research databases ensured that the research material met scholarly standards. Education Resources Information Clearinghouse (ERIC) represents a comprehensive digital library of education research and information sponsored by the Institute of Education Science (IES) of the US Department of Education and is recommended by top research methods publishers (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Galvan & Galvan, 2017). Abstracts from peer-reviewed publications published between 2010 to 2021 were searched to reflect the most current research using this database. The following search criteria yielded seventy-three articles: (a) AB=*Principals* or *School leaders* or *administrators* AND AB= *Mindfulness* (b) AB=*Principals* or *School leaders* or *administrators* AND AB= *Self-awareness* (c) AB=*Principals* or *School leaders* or *administrators* AND

AB= *Self-aware\** or *self-aware\**AND *mindful\** (d) AB=*Principals* or *School leaders* or *administrators* AND AB= *decision making* or *decision-making* or *decision-making process* or *decision-making process* AND *mindful\** (e) Select a field =*educational administration* or *educational leadership* or *school administration* AND Select a field = *mindful\**. After searching ERIC, SCOPUS, a research database published by Elsevier, was used to search for articles not contained in the previous ERIC searches. The following search terms, which yielded fifteen articles, were used in SCOPUS: *Educational leadership, school principal, mindfulness* (ALL FIELDS). Google Scholar, another highly used research tool, surfaced eleven additional articles. Finally, reference sections of articles yielded two seminal works that were referenced in several articles. The result of all these searches provided sixty-six unique listings. After an inspection of the articles, thirty-two articles were removed whose abstracts did not include references to principals and mindfulness in a school setting.

Thirty-four sources that met the identified criteria were imported into Abstrackr (Wallace et al., 2012), an abstract screening tool created by Brown University. Articles were then screened using key terms and labels containing the words mindfulness, principals, and self-aware to select the abstracts to include in the systematic review. An abstract screening process using Abstrackr ensured the quality and criteria of the literature chosen for review. An initial screening of all the article abstracts included labeling the key terms and marking the articles as yes, no, or maybe. Hence, twenty articles were marked yes, five articles no, and nine articles maybe. An additional peer researcher participated in collaboratively screening each article's abstract and reviewing content to determine if the article met the research question criteria. Each article was screened by both parties to eliminate and identify that the literature met the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Keywords and labels, including principals, decision-making, mindfulness, self-aware, school leaders, and administrators, were chosen to assist the screening process and represent the literature review's emphasis on principals' use of mindfulness in a school setting. After an extensive screening process, seventeen of thirty-four articles were eliminated due to the abstracts not meeting the literature review criteria of principals' use of mindfulness and inclusion/exclusion criteria listed above. Fifteen articles and two dissertations qualified according to the inclusion criteria. After data extraction, an additional three articles were removed due to a lack of support for the research question. A visual representation of this process is included in Figure 1.

## **Figure 1**

### *Research Process*



After the articles were collaboratively reviewed by two researchers, a quality check was performed to ensure the articles met the following criteria:

- Did the author adequately answer the research question?
- How was the study designed, and did it sufficiently answer the question?
- Did the data collection provide rich descriptive information if qualitative or detailed analysis if quantitative?

All articles reflected in these findings met the quality criteria and represented research on principals' use of mindfulness in school settings.

## Findings

### Descriptives

Using information gathered from each of the articles in the final list, the researcher created an Author Inclusion Table (AIT), which provides the following information for each article in tabular format: (a) author(s), (b) year of publication, (c) research method (i.e., quantitative, qualitative, mixed-method), (d) research design (i.e., survey, interview, observation, database analysis, narrative), (e) sample size, (f) setting (i.e., elementary, middle school/junior high, high school), and (g) study purpose as defined by the author(s). Author Inclusion Table (AIT) is provided in Table 1. The review included six quantitative, six qualitative, and two mixed-methods studies. Articles represented research of public schools at all levels: elementary, middle, high school, and university principal preparation programs. Several studies reflected research emphases on stakeholder trust, school reform, well-being, organizational trust, faculty perceptions, and professional development. Principals chosen for these studies represented four international K-12 studies, eight US K-12 studies, and two US principal preparation programs.

**Table 1**

*Author Inclusion Table (AIT)*

Author(s) (year of publication)	M	R	P	ST	Purpose – Related to Principals' Mindfulness
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1	Brion & Gullo (2020)	QI	I	11 US Principals	E, MS, HS	Principals' Perspectives
2	Diotaiuti et al. (2020)	Qn	S	419 Italian Principals	E, MS, HS	Benefits of Mindfulness
3	Fitzgerald (2012)	QI	I	10 US Principals	E	Transformation Leadership
4	Garcia-Post (2016)	X	S, I	10 US Principals	E, MS, HS	Mindfulness in School Reform
5	Hoy et al. (2006)	QI	I	75 US Middle Schools	MS	Organizational Trust
6	Kearney et al. (2013)	X	S, I	149 US Schools	E, MS, HS	Teacher Perceptions
7	Klocko & Wells (2015)	Qn	S	708 Principals	E, MS, HS	Mindfulness Practices Explored
8	Mahfouz (2018)	QI	I	13 Administrators	E, MS, HS	CARE and Mindfulness
9	Mahfouz & Richardson (2020)	Qn	S	180 Students, 30 Programs	U	Principal Preparation Well-being
10	Ryan (2020)	QI	I	1 School District	E, MS, HS	Mindfulness and SEL
11	Tabancalei & Ongel (2020)	Qn	S	495 Istanbul Teachers	MS, HS	Organizational Trust
12	Walker (2020)	QI	I	12 Jamaican Principals	HS	Mindfulness Use
13	Wongkom et al. (2019)	Qn	S	610 Principals	E	Structural Relationship Model
14	Zelvys. et. al (2019)	Qn	S	335 Norway Teachers	HS	Organizational Climate

M = research method (Qn = quantitative; QI = qualitative, X = Mixed Method); R = research design (S = survey, I = interview); P = sample size; ST = Setting (E = elementary, MS = middle school or junior high, HS = high school, U=University).

## Themes

The systematic review of fourteen peer-reviewed research studies revealed five key themes and ten sub-themes related to principals' use of mindfulness in a K-12 school setting. Table 2 reflects the themes and sub-themes discussed in the following sections of this review.

**Table 2**

### *Themes and Supporting Studies*

Themes: Principals' Use of Mindfulness	Supporting Studies
1.1 Mindfulness in School Organizations: Stakeholder Trust	3,5,6,10,11,14
1.2 Mindfulness in School Organizations: Stakeholder Relationships	1,3,4,5,6,7,9,10,11
2.1 Mindfulness in Decision-making: Faculty Trust	1,2,3,4,9,11
2.2 Mindfulness in Decision-making: Techniques	1,2,4,9,11
2.3 Mindfulness in Decision-making: Ethics and Equity	1,4
3.1 Mindfulness and Well-being: Self-care	1,3,9,10,12,14
3.2 Mindfulness and Well-being: Stress	1,3,4,7,8,10,12
4.1 Mindfulness in Leadership: Self-awareness	1,4,9,10,13
4.2 Mindfulness in Leadership: Self-reflection	1,8,9

4.3 Mindfulness in Leadership: Listening	1,4,6,9,13
5.1 Mindfulness and Student Success	1,4,11

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### ***Principals' Mindfulness and School Organizations***

When reviewing the research articles related to principals' mindfulness and school organizations, two specific sub-themes developed: (a) stakeholder trust, and (b) stakeholder relationships.

**Stakeholder Trust.** A principal's mindfulness affected the organizational trust of their school (Hoy et al., 2006; Fitzgerald, 2012; Tabanali & Ongel, 2020). Understanding the concept of mindfulness leads to higher levels of trust by all stakeholders (Fitzgerald, 2012). This trust involved an openness to others' perspectives, consistent communication, and planning with district leaders, parents, and teachers (Hoy et al., 2006).

Principals' mindfulness in developing trust with teachers specifically promoted school mindfulness. This mindfulness reinforced the faculty's trust in the principal (Hoy et al., 2006). Several mindfulness attributes led to faculty trust of principals: benevolence, reliability, competency, honesty, and openness. Mindfulness also promoted shared leadership between principals and teachers, which motivates and empowers the faculty (Garcia-Post, 2016). Hence, the higher the trust level between principals and teachers, the more the teachers interacted with each other, which developed even more organizational trust (Tabanali & Ongel, 2020).

Principals' mindfulness encouraged stronger collaboration by promoting collective actions and constructive conflicts between stakeholders. Subsequently, organizational trust was reflected in the level of trust in the principal, level of trust in colleagues, and level of trust in stakeholders (Ryan, 2020; Tabanali & Ongel, 2020).

Campus climate variables included trust and commitment. These variables were found as a solid connection to a principal's mindfulness (Kearney et al., 2013). Findings suggested that schools that have a poor organizational climate have been influenced by unmindful principals. As the principal mindfulness increases, schools tended to show a more positive organizational climate. Interestingly, for schools with a positive organizational climate, the mindful principal was associated with more effectiveness (Zelvys et al., 2019).

**Stakeholder Relationships.** Principals' mindfulness affected relationships with all school and community stakeholders (Brion & Gullo, 2020; Hoy et al., 2006; Ryan, 2020). In one case study, a school principal stated, "Part of being mindful should be to know students and teachers. We are a community, and we need to work together to help each other" (Brion & Gullo, 2020, p. 126). Relational mindfulness represented a tool for effective leadership. A mindful leader developed not only personal relationship skill-building but also professional relationship skill-building (Brion & Gullo, 2020; Fitzgerald, 2012). Building meaningful relationships was vital to a principal's role as a school leader and was essential to communicating with others. Mindfulness was used to realize this goal through mindful interaction with those around them (Garcia-Post, 2016; Kearney et al., 2013).

Mindfulness in principals reflected constantly communicating and listening to all stakeholder groups and individuals yet maintaining a work-life balance. These were time-consuming, but the leaders must find the time to do these things and maintain a work-life balance (Kearney et al., 2013). Building on the premise that principals must develop relationships to effectively work with the instructional and managerial issues of the school, the researchers in

this systematic review identified various mindfulness attributes that principals use to deal with stressful situations (Klocko & Wells, 2015; Mahfouz, 2018). Leaders who build supportive relationships can manage their stress and make mindful decisions during challenging situations (Mahfouz, 2018, Ryan, 2020).

Mindfulness was also important to teacher-student relationships. The teaching support that teachers showed to students, the classroom climate, and educational content such as behavior and beliefs could be mindfully managed with a more motivational approach. In this respect, teacher mindfulness positively impacted in-class teaching activities and the teacher-student relationship quality (Tabancali & Ongel, 2020). The use of Hoy's (2006) M-Scale showed that principals' mindfulness had a direct correlation to student success (Kearney et al., 2013). The following information helped to understand this relationship: "Regression analyses thus confirmed that two climate variables (teacher trust and principal mindfulness) and four control variables (attendance, socioeconomic status, administrator longevity, and school size) had a significant effect on the independent variable of student success on achievement tests" (Kearney et al., 2013, p. 323).

### ***Principals' Mindfulness and Decision-making***

Some of the studies in this systematic review discussed how principals used mindfulness to make thoughtful decisions. Three sub-themes developed from this review were related to their decision-making: (a) faculty trust, (b) techniques, and (c) equity and ethics.

**Faculty Trust.** Research showed that mindful principals who are transparent with their decision-making promote increased trust and integrity among their faculty and staff (Fitzgerald, 2012, Mahfouz, 2018). In many situations, principals' decision-making process involved collaboration with their teachers. Principals who encouraged teacher participation in decision-making promoted trust with the principal and developed trust among teachers (Diotaiuti et al., 2020; Fitzgerald, 2012). In a study concerning transformational leaders' use of mindfulness, Fitzgerald (2012) said that "transformational leaders use their deeply held beliefs about empowerment to create a transparent decision-making process. There seems to be a strong relationship between transparency in a leader's decision making and transferability in followers' willingness to tackle new or challenging tasks" (p. 53).

**Techniques.** Research has found that mindful decisions require mindful techniques (Brion & Gullo, 2020; Diotaiuti et al., 2020; Garcia-Post, 2016; Mahfouz, 2018; Tabancali & Ongel, 2020). A principal in Brion's and Gullo's (2020) study claimed, "Before we make an important decision, we pray on it, and to me that is mindfulness, making decisions based on facts and using a quiet mind" (p. 123). Garcia's (2016) study reflected that mindful leaders who make good decisions lead their schools to improve student outcomes significantly. Mastery over social and emotional challenges asserted that principals regulate their emotions and behaviors during a challenging situation. Principals who used mindfulness demonstrated self-awareness and regulated emotions. After using mindfulness attributes, good decision-making followed (Diotaiuti et al., 2020; Mahfouz, 2018).

**Equity and Ethics.** Research articles in this systematic review outlined mindfulness practices to promote equity. For example, Brion and Gullo (2020) found that principals were involved in a Fellows Equity Program specifically to examine a principal's mindfulness during

equity decisions. Three of the principals identified ways they used mindfulness in decision-making processes. One principal stated he used mindfulness in equity work “by making conscious equitable decisions that impact equity outcomes” (Brion, & Gullo, 2020, p. 123). However, despite being involved in The Equity Fellows Program, principals did not often contribute explicit examples of how they enacted mindfulness when working toward equity, although they did demonstrate the use of mindfulness-related strategies when potentially working towards equity. Garcia’s (2016) study on mindfulness in school reform highlighted that justice in sustainable leadership is based on equality or social justice. Principals enforced the provision of equal treatment and support for all persons. Their perspectives considered students and staff as assets. However, Brion and Gullo (2020) reflected that even though principals acted in ways that portrayed ethical mindfulness, they did not comment on the social commitment towards upholding ethics related to social justice while being mindful. Equity training that focused on mindfulness assisted in developing more ethically minded principals (Brion & Gullo, 2020).

### ***Mindfulness in Well-Being***

The third theme discussed in this review, mindfulness in a principal’s well-being, produced two sub-themes: (a) self-care and (b) stress. Findings related to how principals perceived their self-care and levels of stress are listed in this section.

**Self-care.** Research concerning the importance of a principal’s well-being and its relationship to mindfulness was documented in several articles (Brion & Gullo, 2020; Fitzgerald, 2012; Mahfouz, 2018). Two themes related to a principal’s mindfulness were self-care and stress. In Fitzgerald’s (2012) study regarding transformational leadership and mindfulness, a Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) tool was used to measure principals’ mindfulness. One of the leading indicators of mindful leadership in a principal’s high MAAS score is the inner drive to empower others. Fitzgerald (2012) stated that mindfulness is defined as a higher consciousness associated with well-being. Mahfouz’s (2018) study investigated principals who participated in the Cultivation Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE) mindfulness training. This program focused on the importance of self-care and how it relates to being mindful. For many of the participants in the CARE program, this training allowed them to reflect on their well-being and how they could change their lifestyles to better meet the demands and expectations of their roles as principals.

A study of rural principals documented the effects of a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) training program on their well-being. The training influenced a principal’s understanding of the needs and perspectives of their students and families, which creates a more holistic notion of each student’s success (Ryan, 2020). On the contrary, a study of Jamaican principals pointed to a lack of mindfulness-based training that could enhance their self-care, hence well-being. There was no evidence of policies or programs that have been implemented to prioritize their well-being (Walker, 2020). According to Zelvys et al. (2019), an effective school is an educational institution that works systematically and continuously for self-improvement to achieve its goals by maximizing its physical and human resources while maintaining the well-being of teachers and students. Principals’ use of mindfulness to support their well-being was related to the school’s climate.

**Stress.** This section explicitly addressed the principal's use of mindfulness as a tool for stress reduction. Several studies in this systematic review documented that principals faced many issues and situations that caused them stress (Brion & Gullo, 2020; Mahfouz, 2018; Klocko & Wells, 2015; Walker, 2020). Research indicated that mindfulness-based tools such as MBSR and other mindfulness professional development training assisted principals in reducing their stress levels (Fitzgerald, 2012; Mahfouz, 2018; Ryan, 2020). Garcia's (2016) study on leadership reform described a principal's perception of "not letting others feel your stress when, as a leader, there are tasks to be done" (p. 147). Principals' stressors caused significant issues and required support to help them address these while leading. Mindfulness benefits offered new possibilities to help school leaders thrive in their agency. University programs supported principals through additional research on mindfulness, training at the university level, workshops, and retreats (Klocko & Wells, 2015).

Participants across the studies mentioned feeling rushed and stressed due to tasks, expectations, and demands. After CARE, some participants acknowledged that they felt more productive, even though they were busy with standardized testing at the end of the school year. They felt more attentive and focused on singular tasks. Some participants also were less harsh with themselves, refusing to "feel guilty if I didn't finish my to-do list on time" (Mahfouz, 2018, p. 612).

Walker (2020) also found that fifteen Jamaican principals experienced work-related stress and anxiety stemming from work intensification and lack of resources to meet work demands. These principals described relying on mindfulness meditation and prayer to counter the effects of physical stress issues such as headaches and high blood pressure. One principal stated, "I am a Christian [and] God is central to my life and how I operate...I include meditation in my daily routine to relax...it helps with lowering my blood pressure...[and] to keep me calm" (Walker, 2020, p. 475).

### ***Mindfulness and Leadership Attributes***

Many studies suggested that the use of mindfulness attributes is a key to effective leadership. These studies reflect the mindfulness attributes of self-awareness, self-reflection, and listening.

**Self-awareness.** Several research studies documented principals' need for self-awareness (Brion & Gullo, 2020; Garcia-Post, 2016; Mahfouz, 2018; Ryan, 2020). Principals described self-awareness as understanding where they were in the moment and an awareness of their demeanor and body language. Participants stated being focused on or attending to the meeting, person, or conversation (Brion & Gullo, 2020; Garcia-Post, 2016). By using self-awareness, principals respected their relationships with others and controlled their emotions and behaviors during challenging situations (Mahfouz, 2018). In a study by Ryan (2020) of a rural school district, he found that mindfulness-based practices and emphasizing self-awareness helped leaders who desired to cultivate a culture of care in their schools. As these leaders used self-awareness and compassion in their schools, they promoted cultural health and increased community collaboration (Ryan, 2020). In several studies, quantitative tools measured the principal's mindfulness attributes. The data identified self-awareness as a common mindfulness attribute. For example, in an international study of 610 principals in Thailand, four key

mindfulness attributes and their sub-components were identified: self-awareness, good decision, commitment, and compassion (Wongkom et al., 2019).

**Self-reflection.** Brion's and Gullo's (2020) qualitative study quoted principals' self-reflection in their leadership practices, such as Molly, who stated, "I often ask myself: did I do the right thing today?" (p. 123). Mahfouz and Richardson (2020) conducted a study that used four instruments of measurement: (a) Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS), (b) Self-Compassion Scale–Short Form (SCS-SF), (c) Rumination and Reflection Questionnaire (RRQ), and (d) The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS). The data reflected that the highest correlations were among reflection and self-compassion, which was strong in their relationship to mindfulness. The data also found that all four scales used were somewhat linked to one another. Aspiring principals' mindful experiences were related to age and experience (Mahfouz & Richardson, 2020).

In Mahfouz's (2018) qualitative study, thirteen school administrations used Jennings et al. (2011) *Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE)*, a mindfulness-based professional development program that helps leaders understand and develop mindfulness practices. The qualitative study showed that although essential components of CARE are based on self-reflection from practical and policy perspectives, school administrators are not provided adequate space and time to reflect and experiment during school hours (Mahfouz, 2018). The CARE study showed that positive outcomes related to self-reflection and self-compassion developed in the leaders' perceptions. Using self-reflection, leaders improved their ability to recognize their emotional reactions enabling them to understand better their leadership roles in developing their school climates (Mahfouz, 2018).

**Listening.** The mindfulness skill of listening was prevalent in several research studies. Using the skill of mindful listening was considered a vital practice in school leadership (Brion & Gullo, 2020; Garcia-Post, 2016; Kearney et al., 2013; Mahfouz, 2018; Wongkom et al., 2019). According to Brion and Gullo (2020), principals described mindfulness in four ways: (a) awareness and attention, (b) present centeredness, (c) modeling listening and respect, and (d) decision-making processes. Participants used elements of these representations in both their discussion of equity-focused and leadership-focused mindfulness practices. A novel theme emerging from the data was the concept of modeling listening and respect as a presentation of mindfulness unique to educational leaders. One principal perceived mindfulness as the act of "modeling the behaviors you want to see in others by listening well" (Brion & Gullo, 2020, p. 124). Listening was mentioned by another principal who said, "I am mindful even when I do not have time to listen to someone; I take the time and make myself fully available in the body and mind. I try to be a better listener every day" (Brion & Gullo, 2020, p. 124). Garcia's (2016) qualitative study documented that principals' follow-up with stakeholders helped them know that they were listening to them. Following through with commitment assisted in the development of meaningful relationships with these valuable stakeholders (Garcia-Post, 2016).

Studies referenced in this review identified teachers as an important stakeholder group (Brion & Gullo, 2020; Kearney et al., 2013; Mahfouz, 2018; Ryan, 2020). Principals became more mindful as leaders by listening to experienced and expert teachers who taught them how to work with them. They modeled experimentation, reflection, and recentering on more effective practices for their faculty and became better over time (Kearney et al., 2013). Mahfouz's (2018) study of thirteen principals mentioned a principal who commented that mindful listening enabled her to learn something new about her leadership. Mindful listening to teachers and students helped

another principal to be less reactive and more self-compassionate (Mahfouz, 2018). Listening was also a vital mindfulness attribute in Wongkom's (2019) quantitative study of 610 Thai principals. These studies reflected the mindful attribute of listening as a key component of principals' development of quality relationships and sound decisions in their school settings (Brion & Gullo, 2020; Garcia-Post, 2016; Mahfouz, 2018; Wongkom et al., 2019).

### ***Mindfulness and Student Success***

Articles reviewed pointed to mindful principals and their relationship to school climate and student success (Brion & Gullo, 2020; Garcia-Post, 2016; Kearney et al., 2013; Mahfouz, 2018; Ryan, 2020). According to Kearney and colleagues (2013), the analysis of 149 schools in Texas indicated that principal mindfulness made a statistically significant independent contribution to the variance in student achievement. Although this study was not concerned with student achievement, a strong case can be made that mindful schools facilitate higher student achievement. Three articles also mentioned Kearney et al.'s (2013) study reflecting student achievement and its relationship to mindfulness (Brion & Gullo, 2020; Garcia-Post, 2016; Tabancali & Ongel, 2020).

### **Discussion**

This systematic review aimed to synthesize and analyze research on principals' use of mindfulness in a school setting. In the previous sections, findings represented some of the research evidence that has been collected over the past ten years regarding principals' use of mindfulness. This section offers a summary of the themes and some observations about these fifteen studies, emphasizing the relationship between the studies' findings. Furthermore, implications regarding future research follow these observations.

First, principals' use of mindfulness and its relationship to organizational trust represented most articles in this study. The principals' use of mindfulness positively influenced the trust of all stakeholders in a school setting. A principal's relationship with staff, faculty, district leadership, parents, and the greater community was vital to success. This review reflected mindfulness practices in developing the trust needed to help stakeholder relationships flourish. During this review, a greater need for professional mindfulness development was apparent to enhance principals' understanding of mindfulness and its implications on organizational trust and relationships. Only two of the studies, Mahfouz (2018) and Ryan (2020), examined mindfulness training and its effects on principals' use and understanding.

Second, the effect of mindfulness training and emphasis on principals' decision-making is frequently documented in these studies. The inter-relationship of mindfulness attributes in leaders and their decision-making permeates this research. Limited articles included information regarding principals' use of mindfulness and its effect on ethical decision-making. The relationship between mindfulness and ethical decision-making has been researched and documented (Frick, 2011; Mullen, 2017). Influential education leaders encounter high-stakes decisions frequently in their roles. Neither the mindfulness questions nor scales adequately reflected the relationships between mindfulness and, specifically, ethical decision-making.

Third, the theme corresponding to a principal's well-being and the relationship to mindfulness also represented a substantial amount of the research in this review. Emphasis on social-

emotional learning (SEL) was prevalent, and measurement scales reflected the need for more comprehensive tools to measure the relationships between mindfulness, SEL, and well-being (Mahfouz, 2018).

Finally, two studies represented comprehensive frameworks reflecting mindfulness in educational leadership (Brion & Gullo, 2020; Wongkom et al., 2019). In comparing the two frameworks, self-awareness and decision-making were common among both frameworks. Another similar theme was compassion (Wongkom et al., 2019) and Modeling Listening and Respect (Brion & Gullo, 2020). Establishing mindful educational leader frameworks is key to supporting research and training regarding principals' mindfulness.

### **Implications**

Several articles suggested exciting implications for future research. Three possible research areas are principals' mindfulness related to student success, student equity, and ethical decision-making. A key concept, in general, suggests the need for more research regarding the use of mindfulness-based training and practices within a K-12 school setting and its impact on student success. Research in the studies regarding organizational trust and mindfulness represents a positive school climate, leading to better faculty communication and possibly increased student success. Another area of future research is principals' mindfulness and student equity. Principals' understanding of how mindfulness related to student equity was not well defined. During the COVID-19 pandemic, student equity has increased because of the move to an online learning environment and the lack of resources to accommodate marginalized students' social, emotional, and learning needs. Finally, principals' use of mindfulness in ethical decision-making would benefit principal preparation programs and professional development programs to implement mindfulness-based training directed towards mindful decision-making when dealing with ethical choices in a K-12 school setting.

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# A Phenomenological Examination of the Responses to Judicialization by College Student Conduct Administrators

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*A qualitative study of twelve student conduct administrators sought to capture their lived experiences relative to the impacts of federal and state regulation, case law, the media, attorney encroachment, parental involvement, and the use of litigation to supersede traditional processes on their professional work and personal lives. The interviews invited participants to share personal narratives about their lived experiences and led to the discovery of seven themes pertaining to the judicialization of their work: (1) communication, (2) conservative decision making, (3) mental health concerns, (4) responding to perceptions of what student conduct is, (5) the role of campus legal counsel, (6) the shift from being student-centered to process-centered, and (7) impacts of students' attorneys. Findings revealed that although this phenomenon has created harms for these practitioners, it has also allowed them to develop strategies for wellness, self-care, and sustainability in the profession.*

**Keywords:** College Student Conduct, College Administrators, Judicialization

Traditionally, the role of the college student conduct administrator, or student conduct officer, is to receive reports of misconduct allegations, meet with a student to understand their perspective on the matter, and evaluate all information to determine if a policy has been violated based on a particular institution's standard of proof (Dannells, 1997; Waller, 2013). When a student is found responsible for violation of policy, the conduct officer issues sanctions commensurate to the nature and circumstances surrounding the violation, its effect on the community, university interests, posture of the responding student, and the student's previous disciplinary history. Although sanctions may be perceived by students to be punitive, they are meant to be educational in nature, restore harms made to impacted parties, and address the health and safety of the community (Shook & Neumeister, 2015). Student conduct administrators typically work under the auspices of a college's or university's student affairs division, and frequently as a department within the dean of students office, although this varies by institution.

The last decade, however, has seen a significant shift in the practice of student conduct (Miller, 2018; Shook & Neumeister, 2015; Waller, 2013). This shift has been led by misportrayals of this work by the media, heightened national attention to the adjudication of sexual misconduct on college campuses, and the encroachment of attorneys into the disciplinary process. Student conduct administrators can be left unprepared for a work environment that is more legalistic than developmental and may experience a precarious mix of emotions as they navigate case law, federal regulations, scrutiny by senior level administrators, legalistic language, and interacting with lawyers against the backdrop of training that did not prepare them for such intense effort.

The encroachment of lawyers into the disciplinary process is a relatively new phenomenon that has emerged since the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) issued the Dear Colleague letter (Ali, 2011) that required complainants and respondents in Title IX-related cases be permitted to have an advisor of their choice—including attorneys—at their hearings. Previously unexplored in student affairs literature, this phenomenon is labeled herein as "judicialization" (Vallinder, 1994), a term borrowed from the political realm and interpreted within to describe the treatment of the undergraduate disciplinary process as a quasijudicial/legalistic system.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of judicialization on student conduct administrators including the physical, emotional, and psychological reactions experienced in response to public scrutiny of their work. The study sought to uncover how concerns about litigation directly affect student conduct administrators in both their personal and professional lives. To understand the nature of these lived experiences, the researchers employed a phenomenological approach, which allowed them to "explore not only what participants experience but also the situations and conditions surrounding those experiences" (Padgett, 2016, p. 41).

### **Research Questions**

Given the purpose of this study, the following research questions were developed in an effort to gain greater insight into how student conduct administrators perceive judicialization affects their personal and professional lives:

1. How do college student conduct administrators experience the impact of judicialization on their professional work?
2. How do college student conduct administrators experience the impact of judicialization on their personal lives?

## **Literature Review**

### **The History of Student Conduct Administration**

The colonial era's disciplinary systems within colleges and universities functioned as that of parent and child, with many students under 18 years old (Dannells, 1997). College presidents or their designees managed student behavior under *in loco parentis*, in which the university had the authority to discipline as a parental figure. Following the Civil War, a shift occurred whereby increased attention was paid to students' intellectual development (Dannells, 1997). Students were expected to take ownership of their decisions rather than accept punishments for their behavior. In this effort, the work of student discipline was reallocated to trained administrators, which Dannells (1997) suggests was an attempt by college presidents to avoid retribution for harsh punishments.

These new administrators discerned that student discipline was more than meting out punishment, and that students would benefit from holistic, thoughtful, and personalized attention to each matter. This philosophy was affirmed by the American Council on Education Studies in the landmark document *The Student Personnel Point of View* (American Council on Educational Studies, 1937), which acknowledged the role of early student affairs workers as legitimate and integral to a student's holistic development.

College and universities soon delegated some adjudicatory responsibility to hearing boards of both students and staff members (Sims, 1971). With increased student activism in the 1960s and 70s came the expanded notion of a student's right to due process in disciplinary hearing procedures and more formalized codes of conduct (Lowery, 2011). Due process shortly became the nucleus of campus discipline, particularly following the historic decision of *Dixon v. Alabama State Board of Education* (1961). *Dixon* not only confirmed due process in public college and university disciplinary proceedings as a student's right, but also motivated institutions to create more formal, legalistic judicial systems to adjudicate misconduct (Baldizan, 1998).

### **Federal Legislation and Guidance**

#### ***Clery Act***

The 1990 Crime Awareness and Campus Security Act, later renamed the Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Crime Statistics Act (Clery, Clery Act), was passed by Congress to increase transparency about crime on campus and issue timely warnings about serious or ongoing

threats to campus. It is perhaps this law that has been the most intrusive in student conduct work, as it evaluates student behavior which may be considered a violation of law in addition to a violation of campus policy. Conduct administrators who also manage Clery statistics must have intimate and up-to-date knowledge of several legislative acts and laws that govern what is reported, an added burden when they are also considering behavior in the context of campus behavioral expectations that may not necessarily rise to the level of a violation of law. The nature of Clery compliance requires a true collaborative effort among campus constituencies including law enforcement, campus security, residence life, student conduct, among others.

### ***Title IX***

Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972 states that “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.” OCR’s 2011 Dear Colleague Letter reaffirmed a college’s role in adjudicating reports of sexual misconduct in which a student is the alleged perpetrator (Ali, 2011). The letter, applicable to all institutions that receive federal financial aid, compelled colleges to write new procedures to address sexual violence on campus (Miller & Sorochty, 2014) including lowering the standard of proof in sex- and gender-based harassment hearings, requiring an institution to apply equal appeal opportunities to both parties involved, and proposing an accelerated adjudication process with a 60-day limit. The enhanced requirements for disciplinary proceedings pertaining to sexual misconduct, along with increased media scrutiny, further propelled campus conduct offices toward establishing a quasi-judicial process which many argued campuses were ill-equipped to facilitate themselves (Winn, 2017).

In 2017, under the direction of Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, OCR released a new Dear Colleague letter that withdrew the guidance set forth in 2011 (Jackson, 2017). Recognizing that the earlier regulations were circulated without the proper rulemaking procedures, the 2017 letter allowed schools to choose the standard of proof to find respondents responsible for sexual misconduct, suggesting they use the same standard as is used in other student conduct cases on their respective campuses (Office for Civil Rights, 2017).

### ***A Student’s Right to Counsel***

The rulemaking sessions of the 2014 reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act detailed the parameters for parties’ advisors in sexual misconduct cases, permitting students to have “an advisor of their choice” at “any related meeting or proceeding” (Violence Against Women Act Negotiated Rulemaking Committee, 2014, p. 2). This includes attorneys, whom even student conduct professionals have asserted can be valuable supports for students as they navigate the complexities of the disciplinary process (King & White, 2016). However, courts have held that non-sexual misconduct cases do not require legal representation for students (*Gorman v. University of Rhode Island*, 1986; *Wasson v. Trowbridge*, 1967) and that when attorneys are permitted, institutions can limit their participation in hearings (*Osteen v. Henley*, 1993).

In 1975, *Gabrilowitz v. Newman* determined that counsel could be permitted at a campus disciplinary hearing when the student respondent is facing both criminal and disciplinary charges

for the same behavior (Weisinger, 1981), but only to protect the student's due process interests at the criminal hearing and that the student did not have a Constitutional right to counsel for the campus hearing. The courts have also held, following *French v. Bashful* (1969), that if the institution utilizes counsel in adjudicating the matter, a student may have the right to counsel as well. While conduct administrators' work previously focused inviting students to take ownership of their decision-making and clarify their values system, it has shifted significantly as the presence of lawyers in the disciplinary process has deepened its semblance to a judicial proceeding.

### **The Lived Experiences of Student Conduct Administrators Today**

There is little research in regard to how the judicialization of college discipline has impacted the personal lives and professional practices of conduct administrators. Waller (2013) reinforced the problem of the delicate balance between the developmental needs of the student, institutional priorities, and legal requirements. Framing the problem as one of competing interests, Dowd (2012) wrote, "Politics, institutional reputation, fear of litigation, and financial ramifications of pending disciplinary actions can further undermine ethicality" (p. 5). Layering in the components of legislative guidance, case law, crisis management, attention to First Amendment rights, and accommodating students with disabilities amongst an increasingly litigious climate makes the profession of student conduct administration ever more precarious.

### ***Caplan's Phases of Crisis***

Because this study sought to uncover the specific emotional, practical, and physiological responses to the judicialization of student conduct, it was based in psychological theory that had been used previously to understand how physicians manage their reactions to litigation and malpractice stress. More specifically, Caplan's (1964) phases of crisis has been used in the medical literature to examine the ways in which doctors have reacted to malpractice suits. It was applied similarly to this study to help illuminate the various responses that student conduct administrators may have to the increasingly legalistic landscape encroaching on the university disciplinary process.

Caplan's (1964) phases of crisis provide a structure for the various responses a student conduct officer may have to the increasingly legalistic climate of the profession. Grounded in the belief that problem-solving skills can increase resistance to stress, the four phases outline the rise in tension, an overburdening of coping mechanisms, lingering dysphoria, and coming to terms with the problem. In a report on physicians practicing in rural regions in the United States, Bushy and Rauh (1993) compiled the human response characteristics to crisis from earlier literature, categorized them into Caplan's phases, and applied them to professional litigation, i.e., malpractice suits. The phases of crisis may serve to validate student conduct professionals' responses to litigation and ultimately suggest strategies for intervention or relief.

### **Methodology**

To ascertain the scope of the problem pertaining to the judicialization of student conduct, this phenomenological study was the qualitative strand of a mixed methods inquiry which used both

a written instrument and personal interviews to provide a breadth of previously unexplored information. The Concerns About Litigation Survey for Student Conduct Professionals (CALSSCP) was developed using Brodsky and Cramer's Concerns About Litigation Survey (2008) as a foundation, with additional questions adapted from Wilbert and Fulero (1988), Benbassat et al. (2001), and Fileni et al. (2007). Between October 24 and November 11, 2019, 350 respondents fully completed the CALSSCP as administered through Qualtrics. The quantitative strand and related findings are reported by Glassman and Lewis (2022). Approximately 150 participants indicated interest in being interviewed.

Noting that the response rate for interview interest was evenly distributed between male- and female-identifying participants, twelve respondents were selected at random under the following demographics: six males and six females; three men and three women whose offices adjudicate matters of sex- and gender-harassment and three men and three women whose offices do not. Only 12 of the 350 survey respondents identified as non-binary/genderqueer/other. Survey participants were not asked to describe their racial identity.

### **Qualitative Data Collection**

This study followed a phenomenology approach to understanding the impacts of judicialization on student conduct practitioners. Phenomenological research connects the experiences of several individuals to find a common meaning or thread among them (Creswell, 2012) and often involves data collection via interviews (Bevan, 2014). The goal of the researcher is to capture the "essence" (Creswell, 2012, p. 96), or the "very nature of the thing" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 177) that is shared by the study participants.

The questions from Miller's (2018) interviews of student conduct and Title IX administrators involved in OCR inquiries formed the basis of the semi-structured interview format. To gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of judicialization, the interview questions offered the participants space to freely discuss their perspectives and experiences on specific topics in a confidential setting. The researchers spoke with each participant for around one hour, obtaining consent to proceed and record the conversation. The participants' identities were kept anonymous; their study pseudonyms align with their gender identification. See Table 1 for participant demographics.

### **Positionality of the Researchers**

Before beginning to analyze the data, the primary investigator was required to take notice of and set aside personal knowledge, experiences, and beliefs about the phenomenon being studied in a practice Husserl (1970) called "bracketing." While it is impossible for a researcher to completely remove himself or herself - and the preconceptions they hold - from the study subjects, it is incumbent upon the researcher to be aware of their attitude toward the matter at hand and self-conscious of the stereotypes, beliefs, and worldviews that could potentially influence the interpretation of data. The findings presented herein are therefore one possible interpretation of the primary investigator's standpoint as a mid-level conduct administrator with thirteen years' experience.

In the present study, the primary investigator identified several factors that could have influenced the interpretation of the participants' reported experiences during the interviews. First, the primary investigator's knowledge of the intensity of the professional work of the participants could have influenced their interpretation of the interview data. Next, the primary investigator had personally experienced immense institutional pressure to be more cognizant of litigation threat and respond with caution to any pending disciplinary matter. This certainly informed the nature of this study and more specifically, shaped the questions that were asked in the interviews. Being aware of these biases should have allowed the primary investigator to better listen to the participants and study the data to find common themes and experiences beyond those already acknowledged. To aid to further mitigate any potential bias by attempting to infuse a more objective perspective, a former university student affairs administrator with the prerequisite knowledge of student conduct matters and current university faculty member in educational leadership was enlisted as a sub-investigator. The sub-investigator reviewed and provided feedback regarding all questions developed for the interview protocol, the data collected, and the primary investigator's interpretations of the data.

**Table 1**  
*Demographic Information of Interview Participants*

Participant Name	Institution Type	Gender	Does Office Adjudicate TIX Allegations?	Geographic Region
Alice	Two-year, public	Female	Yes	Midwest
Bradley	Four-year, public	Male	Yes	Southeast
Carl	Four-year, private	Male	No	Midwest
Deborah	Four-year, private	Female	Yes	Northeast
Elizabeth	Four-year, public	Female	No	Southeast
Francine	Four-year, private	Female	No	Northeast
Grace	Four-year, public	Female	No	Northeast
Henry	Two-year, public	Male	Yes	Mid-Atlantic
Isaac	Four-year, private	Male	No	Southeast
Jacob	Four-year, public	Male	Yes	Southeast
Kenny	Four-year, public	Male	No	Southeast

## Findings

Interviews were conducted in early 2020. Notably, the earliest of these took place nearly four months before the Department of Education published its Final Rule on Title IX on May 6, 2020, which solidified new expectations for educational institutions in addressing matters of sexual harassment and misconduct on campus. The pending regulations in the interim months before the Final Rule, which appeared to roll back protections for complainants and increase procedural rights in favor of respondents, were cited by many interviewees as a pressing concern impacting their professional work.

Interviews were transcribed into a text file and uploaded to NVivo, where they were coded using an inductive approach to highlight similarities across participants (Thomas, 2006). Seven themes emerged pertaining to the impacts of judicialization on their professional work and personal lives, along with participants' suggestions for reducing the impacts of judicialization, as explored in the following sections.

### Communication

Nearly all interviewees indicated that the amount and methods of communication with others changed significantly following increasing judicialization of student conduct work. The implication that a student or their family would expose alleged cracks in the disciplinary process was profound for these practitioners. All seemed aware of the ways in which being unable to respond to public comment or scrutiny affected and formalized how they shared information with students. Francine explained, “[I]t's not fun to have conversations with students where they're just, you know, that like every word out of your mouth is going to be held against you.”

Almost every participant reported that judicialization seemed to change the fundamental nature of how they communicated with students, many acknowledging that they were cognizant of how carefully they selected words and sought to ensure that any communication was accurate, detailed, and even reviewed by a peer or supervisor, as exemplified by both Deborah and Henry referred to “crossing Ts and dotting Is” in an effort to pay close attention to what is in their written communication.

### Conservative Decision-Making

Participants highlighted how judicialization led to a more conservative application of policies and processes, often retreating to making a decision that benefits the student and reduces the liability for future litigation. Alice said, “I think it is mostly just a very conservative workplace, if that makes sense...I'm making an educational decision or am I making a decision that I know won't be argued against either by the students or by my higher-up.” Further, embedded in the theme of conservative decision-making is the fear of making mistakes. Several participants shared feelings of worry or anxiety over being called out by someone for messing up; for example, Francine noted a concern that a mistake in a letter could get blown out of proportion, which

would interfere with the educational component of the disciplinary process. This theme permeated into the matter of sanctioning as well. Carl explained that while disciplinary action is private, the implicit message surrounding the sanction seems to be a known entity. Instead of acting with the finality of expulsion, Carl said, his institution will issue a lengthier period of suspension than what a less egregious policy violation might warrant, sending the message that his university would never truly permanently separate a student from the school and that at some point, a student might be welcomed back.

## **Mental Health Concerns**

By far, the widest-reaching theme to emerge from the twelve interviews was that of mental health concerns, surfacing with eleven participants. While some named the problem as simply stress, others identified medical diagnoses or symptoms that they believed were a direct result of or exacerbated by their work in student conduct, including post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, weight loss, and sleep deprivation.

Several pinpointed the nature of student conduct work and its differentiation from other student affairs fields as the source of mental distress in that student conduct is the one department that can impact a student's standing at their institution of higher education. Linda explained that a conduct officer typically must deliver difficult news to a student and help them "imagine their life in a different way than they thought," which is "hard enough." She added that the influence that senior administrators may have over a conduct decision and how it impacts the sense of autonomy a conduct practitioner might have in the process makes it even more stressful. Three practitioners, Deborah, Jacob, and Isaac, whose offices all handle Title IX adjudication for their respective institutions, reported newly detected problems involving personal intimacy. Jacob shared that he stopped watching *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* an NBC crime drama spin-off that concentrates on the investigation of sexual assault crimes, indicating that he is "in this work all the time," and that the show sometimes portrays work similar to his own. For Deborah, the weight of the work infiltrated her life much more directly, impacting her sex life: "Sometimes there are days that you spend a whole day thinking about people being hurt in intimate ways and you come home, and you don't want to be touched."

A conduct administrator's deep concern for students can create conflict when a student appears litigious or it seems like the public eye is scrutinizing one's every move. Elizabeth remarked that in an appeal process, a student or organization would use that opportunity to fabricate "just completely blatant lies about my practice or how I've engaged with students," creating a sense of frustration as students and their attorneys attempt to resolve problems by going above her. Alice, Carl, and Kenny shared experiences of deep social-emotional impact, some to the point of deep depression and sadness. Alice noted a sense of vicarious traumatization resulting from working with students involved in sexual misconduct matters.

## **Responding to Perceptions of What Student Conduct Is**

Elizabeth alluded to the fact that senior administrators at her own institution were not fully engaged in understanding what her role is and the processes by which a student may be issued disciplinary action. This, too, was a highly discussed topic by 10 of the 12 participants. Many of

the interviewees targeted the media for skewing the truth, presenting only a narrow segment of a story, or misrepresenting the college disciplinary process entirely. Deborah noted that many people's opinions on how student conduct is supposed to operate are based in movies "where the dean is always the bad guy," or they "come in expecting a courtroom." The interviewees alluded to the fact students only take to the media when they feel wronged by the process, not just by a negatively impacting sanction, but even by the mere finding of responsibility for violating policy.

There was a shared perspective by five of the interviewees reflecting on their own expertise and opinions by conduct outsiders about their ability to facilitate disciplinary processes. Kenny noted that several professionals around him suggested he get a law degree to become proficient in student conduct work, despite over 13 years of experience in the field following a master's degree and later pursuing a PhD. He explained: "I want to show how people with a student development background as opposed to a legal background can be really impactful in this work." Deborah and Henry both expressed frustration that they are not seen as subject matter authorities while pointing to general counsel and the vice president of human resources, who are often called upon for their student conduct "expertise" but who are not immersed daily in student affairs work.

Some of the participants discussed the spotlight shone on sexual harassment and campus sexual misconduct through the #MeToo movement as challenges to a fair and impartial process, untainted by media influence. Alice reflected on the double-edged sword nature of the increase in campus reporting of such behavior: students come to campus more knowledgeable of what sexual consent is, but because of celebrities getting away with sexual harassment, students were more likely to feel that their perpetrator would as well. That, coupled with the public's constant scrutiny of whether campuses should even adjudicate sexual misconduct at all, led to a sense of hopelessness for ever having a semblance of a fair process.

### **The Role of Campus Legal Counsel**

Almost all participants reported that their offices maintained relationships with their institution's attorneys and connected with them regularly regarding adjudication of disciplinary matters. Alice and Kenny both noted the harmful impacts of counsel changing a sanction or interfering in the disciplinary process, and not just by violating the written process for the adjudicating of cases (and therefore increasing a school's liability to be sued in a different, subsequent conduct matter). In interfering with the conduct body's decision-making or the appellate process, attorneys also negatively impact the staff member's self-esteem and sense of competence.

The interviewees reported varying levels of communication with their campus attorneys. Linda said that "I feel like I spent a lot of my days consulting with our general counsel's office to make sure that I am thinking of every angle I should be thinking of." It appeared commonplace that a conduct officer would touch base with counsel regarding an outcome before disclosing it to the responding student or organization on high-profile or serious cases. Deborah, who had worked in student conduct for over a decade, noted: "The follow up that I do in terms of communicating with my supervisor and our general counsel about what was said, what the concerns are, what the decisions are – and all of that has increased significantly over the last,

maybe five or six years in particular.” Francine seemed to worry about the impacts of what it means to have to bring in campus counsel, perhaps unnecessarily intensifying the case at hand. Jacob appeared exasperated at the need for his campus’ general counsel to be involved any time a student had a lawyer present: “I have to then have one of the two lawyers that we have on campus be present at a student conduct hearing for an alcohol violation.”

Other conduct officers were more comfortable bringing campus counsel into conversations pertaining to disciplinary matters. Bradford noted that his campus’s general counsel had a “dedicated student affairs staff member.” He said, “I think we have a really good relationship with our legal office, so if I ever find myself in a situation where it feels like a more judicial case, I don’t ever hesitate to touch base with my supervisor and bring in legal if we need to.” Isaac explained that while there is a good relationship and while counsel is easily connected with for “big threat” situations, he was “not empowered in my role to voluntarily contact our lawyers, so that already has to go up a chain to be activated.” There seemed to be a common thread about the seniority of a conduct staff member and their ability to have direct access to counsel.

### **Student-Centered v. Process-Centered**

Eleven of the 12 interviewees recognized that judicialization seemed to be responsible for causing a shift in the sensibilities of the conduct process moving from being developmental, educative, and formative to focusing intensely on following procedure, being cautious of what is communicated to the student, and avoiding litigation. The participants appeared to agree with Carl’s assertion that “whenever an attorney comes involved, even though theoretically it doesn’t change the process or change anything, I think, in all reality and all practicality, it changes everything.” Alice remarked how she “can’t have a real conversation with a student [when] there’s an attorney sitting there.” She inferred that she couldn’t holistically address the student’s well-being because the attorney would misinterpret any good intentions.

Grace, Kenny, and Isaac each used the word “adversarial” to describe the feeling when an attorney enters into the conversation. While they recognized that the law, under the 2011 Dear Colleague letter and persisting through the 2020 Final Rule, permits a student to have an advisor of their choice in cases related to sexual harassment, their full involvement in campus disciplinary processes does not serve well to separate out the semblance of a courtroom-like proceeding from one that was originally designed to be educational.

### **The Impacts of Students’ Attorneys**

When students bring counsel into the disciplinary process, the impacts on the conduct administrators can be both positive and negative. Bradford reported that sometimes a student’s attorney can assist with the disciplinary process, particularly in the case of a mutual agreement or resolution in which the attorney helps the student acknowledge that the evidence pointing to a policy violation is rather clear. This can serve to support the authority of the conduct officer. Henry concurred, suggesting that sometimes attorneys are “able to talk a little bit of sense into the student to take some responsibility.”

But frequently, interviewees found lawyers to be an interference with the educational and developmental aspects of the disciplinary process. Carl explained that the presence of a lawyer fundamentally changes the spirit of the process. Elizabeth, who works at an institution with a student-run honor system, noted that she typically interacts with attorneys at the appeal level, and at her school it is mainly student organizations who retain counsel for their disciplinary matters. She added that while there are many student organizations that have their own counsel through their national headquarters (e.g., fraternities and sororities), these groups are often calling on a local alum who may be a tax or real estate attorney (and not trained in education law) to help them with their grievances.

Several of the participants found that students' attorneys are disrespectful to campus professionals. Deborah reported she felt bullied before she learned to feel empowered to "keep the lawyers in their places" and stand up to them. Grace shared how she had received some intimidating email correspondence from lawyers who would threaten her credentials and her ability to do her job because she is an educator and not an attorney, inferring that they believe the disciplinary process should be even more legalistic. Jacob noted that the job can be harder for conduct administrators in those states that permit students to have full legal representation in campus disciplinary proceedings.

The topic of students' attorneys is inextricably linked to their accessibility and affordability. Half of the interviewees mentioned the disparities between those who can and cannot afford representation or the resulting discrepancies of treatment by the institution. Francine recognized the population differences between her former employment at a small public technical college and "a private institution where most of these folks come from pretty well-off backgrounds." Alice shared this sentiment, "because I know that not every student can afford an attorney...And so it's really hard for me, too. It's like if a student has an attorney come in, their sanctions shouldn't be any different from a student who didn't have one come in."

### **Reducing the Impacts of Judicialization**

Perhaps most telling from the twelve interviews are the numerous strategies the participants identified in helping themselves feel less impacted by judicialization. These can be sorted into two categories: supporting the practitioners through their professional work and through their personal lives. The strategies appeared to be evenly distributed between the two classifications.

Two-thirds of the interviewees reported that having a supportive supervisor or colleagues who understand how judicialization might affect a conduct practitioner can make a profound difference in how deeply those forces are felt, and that a reliable, sympathetic team can even help to absorb some of the impacts. Isaac reported that he and his supervisor schedule time together in advance of hearings that might be "particularly draining or...difficult" to reflect on any road bumps or just decompress. Deborah, who is the sole conduct practitioner at her institution, got the support of her supervisor after she "finally had kind of a breakdown" from a particularly difficult hearing. The supervisor helped build in additional personnel supports for the day of a hearing to assist with logistics. Jacob said that because his campus attorney is also a former social worker, "she gets it," and as the director of his own office, he acknowledged "the impacts of helping other folks to manage what I know are impactful situations and taxing

situations, both professionally for them, but also then knowing what's happening with them as people.”

Kenny and Francine pointed to the power of mentors who do not work within their institutional spaces. Francine said that “having a pal at another institution you can call up” and get a different perspective on a conduct case can be a useful tool to “to let the stress sort of roll off your back a little bit more.” Kenny shared that he connected with an alumnus of his doctoral program because they share similar identities, who, Kenny said, “as far as self-care, he really keeps me focused on what the important thing is. He really is getting me.”

Participants also noted that a connection to the broader student conduct community and keeping up with law and policy updates helped them to feel more comfortable with the legalistic nature of their work. Three pointed to the benefits provided by Facebook discussion forums specifically for student conduct practitioners and the Association for Student Conduct Administration (ASCA) listserv. Alice and Deborah specifically referred to the ASCA Women and Student Conduct Facebook group as a safe space and “a great resource” in which they can ask for advice. Five of the interviewees said that reading current case law allows them to feel better prepared to manage some of the legalistic aspects of their work. Jacob reported that a relevant case in his regional circuit’s Court of Appeals informed his decision-making in a recent campus disciplinary hearing in which he otherwise might not have taken the right steps.

There were several strategies the interviewees noted that helped them to reduce the impacts of judicialization by setting limits on the scope of their work and taking a positive mindset approach to compartmentalizing it. Jacob and Francine talked about how excluding certain responsibilities like serving on a behavioral intervention team or in an on-call duty rotation for the institution allowed them to lift the weight of performing additional labor.

Francine said, “Taking that off the plate, I’m not dealing with as much sort of heavy emotional burden and [that] actually has contributed greatly to my satisfaction.” Isaac found it helpful to leave his office and work from a different space on campus.

Kenny reported that “preparing yourself or being aware of the litigious nature” of the work beyond the typical “one law class every [student affairs] master’s student takes” can help a conduct practitioner “be a defensive professional.” Similarly, Grace and Isaac used psychological reframing to change the meaning of what was happening to them in their work. Grace said that while it does not always change her feelings, she works to reframe her thinking so that she can understand it better. Isaac explained the mental process he went through when he got his first litigation hold. While he had “a lot of anxiety that came with that, specifically what it meant,” he was able to identify a “higher anxiety moment” from his past, which reduced his stress levels about that case.

## **Discussion**

As students have come to view their higher education as a commodity and their relationship with their universities as contractual, student conduct administrators have come under intensifying scrutiny as executors of that contract. To some extent limited in their capacity because of institutional policies for student behavior and those federal laws and statutes, conduct practitioners increasingly have been accused of the unfair treatment of students, inappropriate application of policy, and abuse of their power. On their end, conduct officers have felt the

immense pressure of having their work regulated by federal law, exasperated by the ever-shifting climate and pendulum swing that seems to come with each new presidential administration. The media, in sensationalizing sexual misconduct lawsuits in which accused students sue their institutions for failure to follow due process, construct a singular narrative of vengeful conduct administrators to which the practitioners are unable to respond because of educational record privacy laws. This in turn amplifies the psychological impacts on those practitioners, affecting everything from the language they use in an email to a student to their intimate partner relationships.

This study sought to identify common threads among the lived experiences of student conduct administrators as they pertain to impacts of judicialization, public scrutiny, the encroachment of students' attorneys, and interference by senior administrators into the disciplinary process. Contextualizing the interviews of twelve such practitioners within the landscape of student conduct history, evolving legislation and case law, and previous studies revealed a deep concern by the study participants for expectations of perfectionism, diluted educational outcomes due to an emphasis on process, and severe impacts on mental health. For example, the interviewees reported, dialogue with students can be inhibited by judicialization. When attorneys become a part of the campus process their simply being present tangibly changes the character of the interactions thereafter. Grace reported "I think just the ability to have that educational relationship with a student is markedly different when attorneys are involved." It may be inferred, then, that it is not the strictness of process itself that impacts a conduct practitioner's ability to make connections with students, but the heightened sense of being under observation and being held exactly to those procedural expectations by attorneys that changes the atmosphere for student conduct administrators.

Further, although the study group was limited to twelve, the researchers found that gender differences may play a role in how conduct administrators respond to the stressors of their work. Female interviewees, in general, spoke more frequently and in depth than men about how the threats of their work damaged their health, relationships, perceptions of their job, and feelings of self-efficacy. They detailed specific ailments and pinpointed specific scenarios in far greater depth, talking about lack of sleep, weight loss, depression, anxiety, loss of interest in intimacy, and exhaustion. For example, while Deborah reported how her first several cases at work led to not sleeping and not eating, Isaac said that when he got his first litigation hold, he "wouldn't say [he] lost sleep." Such illustrations complement the quantitative study conducted by Glassman and Lewis (2022), which indicate that female-identified conduct administrators appear to experience the impacts of judicialization more significantly in the realm of their personal lives.

Additionally, interviewees reported numerous experiences that did not seem to align with their expectations of what would actually take place in their professional work. Citing such examples of students using litigation to escape accountability and avoid the formal consequences of one's behavior, worry that a single email could be misinterpreted and held against oneself, and going over an administrator's head to their supervisor or even a vice president, they noted that their professional preparation did not prepare them for the day-to-day realities.

Overall, there is a striking parallel between the critogenic ("law-caused;" Gutheil et al., 2000) harms of litigation threat and legal action that manifest in both physicians and student conduct administrators. Bushy and Rauh (1993) expose the cycles of Caplan's (1981) phases of

crisis as experienced by litigated rural physicians. It is not a far stretch to translate the expressed concerns of doctors in their report to those described by conduct practitioners. The first phase, impact, may bring to light the practitioner's typical coping mechanisms and if these are not adequate, the event becomes more central in the life of the practitioner and looms large amidst both their professional work and personal life. For example, Isaac had reported that when he received his first litigation hold it created a lot of anxiety for him regarding "specifically what it meant." The search for meaning in the litigation is potentially fruitless or else could lead to more emotion-focused coping, forcing the conduct practitioner to review countless communications and interactions in their head that may never yield a reason for the lawsuit or threat.

Disorganization is the second phase and is the one in which the aforementioned mental health concerns are most likely to emerge, according to Bushy and Rauh (1993). This is also the phase in which practitioners explore using coping behaviors beyond their typical toolbox. Many of the interviewees spoke to using therapy or prescribed medications, but others like Jacob, who reported a worsening "general addiction to caffeine" since working in student conduct, have engaged in unhealthy coping techniques. Several of the interviewees have successfully worked through Caplan's recovery phase, using "wholesome coping tools" (Arimany-Manso et al., 2018) to work through their stress. Elizabeth noted that having a supportive boss with whom she could speak authentically was of tremendous value in working through the problems of unwarranted conduct hearing appeals or insults to her character that both she and her boss knew not to be true. Others cited that the ability to talk openly with other conduct practitioners going through the same experiences in Facebook groups like Student Conduct Professionals and the Association for Student Conduct Administration listserv helped them to not feel as lonely or isolated.

Finally, the reorganization phase involves an integration of the disruptive event into one's "post-crisis normal" (Bushy & Rauh, 1993, p. 60). The litigation becomes an event that, to some degree, has been mastered and that will inform future approaches and coping mechanisms to other stressful events. Deborah had reported that she used her early interactions with students' attorneys, which she first found intimidating, as a development opportunity and learn from colleagues how to "feel more empowered to keep the lawyers in their places."

### **Implications for Practice**

It remains true that many college student personnel or student affairs master's degree programs have little more than a single semester's worth of higher education law in their curricula, and coursework is unlikely to expose a budding professional to the everyday realities of the student conduct profession. It is therefore incumbent upon individual institutions or the Association for Student Conduct Administration (ASCA) to offer regular, current training for new professionals that realistically addresses the judicialized climate of the profession and provides support in their first few years in the field. Such a training would be appropriate for the Mary Beth Mackin Foundations of Professional Practice Track at ASCA's annual Donald D. Gehring Academy, a summer immersion workshop featuring several content tracks, but this study makes it clear that professionals on all levels of experience would benefit from this information.

Perhaps most revealing about this study is that throughout the course of interviews, participants indicated that the mere acknowledgement of this phenomenon as a legitimate study

validated their experiences as potentially traumatic, impacting their sense of self and of mattering – to students, the profession, and the institution. This seems to demonstrate a shared culture of belief of self-worth, and simultaneously one that demoralizes practitioners as result of taking away their ability to independently resolve disciplinary matters without outside influence. The research conducted in this study also demonstrated a need and desire for conduct administrators to be able to talk either with one another or a mentor about their experiences to gain validation, advice, support, and community.

The researchers noted an increasing use of the student conduct Facebook groups, specifically ASCA Women and Student Conduct and Student Conduct Professionals, to vent about work problems that were clearly the result of the judicialization of the practice. Such posts frequently receive more comments, including those that which to express while they are unable to offer solutions, they stand in solidarity with the original poster. While each of these groups offer a way for an individual to post anonymously, there appears to be greater value in real-time conversation with a skilled, knowledgeable colleague, such as there was during the semi-structured study interviews. ASCA should provide space at regional and national conferences for individuals to talk openly about their concerns.

### **Future Research Recommendations**

Based upon the findings of this study, future research is recommended to further explore the impact of judicialization on student conduct administrators. Of note in the results were that female-identified student conduct practitioners self-report their experience of the impacts of judicialization in both their personal and professional lives at a more severe level than their male-identified colleagues. The bulk of participants in the studies by Charles et al. (1984; 1985; 1988) on physicians' litigation stress were men, thus limiting the potential for insight into the difference in impacts of litigation stress on these two demographic subgroups. Future research should addresses the spectrum of gender identification and workplace roles, including a greater sample of non-binary participants, to determine if any seem to be more resilient to the effects of judicialization and the reasons why.

Amid the COVID-19 global pandemic that significantly affected most every aspect of daily life, student conduct administrators continued to perform their responsibilities under demanding physical, social, and psychological conditions, often in a virtual environment working from home. The result of judicialization's impact combined with those of the pandemic may be worth further exploration. A survey administered by the National Association of Student Affairs Administrators (NASPA, 2021) in June 2021 found that many higher education student affairs professionals, including student conduct administrators, are at high risk for burnout due to stress and that they no longer feel valued by their institutions. Throughout the United States and beyond, significantly high levels of employee departures throughout numerous sectors of the workforce, dubbed the Great Resignation, are being attributed to burnout, increased pay, and a desire for better working conditions (Morales, 2022). Future research should gather data on job satisfaction levels of student conduct administrators, including factors influencing their responses such as the effects of judicialization. Exit interviews with outgoing student conduct administrators should inquire about judicialization's influence on their decision. The results of such studies may provide greater insight into the extent which the judicialization of student

conduct and the resulting stress are leading to the departure of student conduct administrators from the field.

### **Conclusion**

The impacts of the judicialization of student conduct administration are wide and far reaching and the work, while often rewarding, is frequently frustrating, legalistic, and isolating. This study revealed that conduct administrators are not fully equipped after their graduate school programs to manage the public scrutiny of their private work or to cope with the dissonance of a professional workplace that often values precision, power, and privilege over moral development, growth, and learning. That conflict is intensified by the encroachment of students' parents and attorneys into the disciplinary process, who complicate the goal of education with rigorous examination of every email sent, every word spoken.

As this study concluded, campus conduct professionals were in the throes of complying with the Final Rule on Title IX issued May 6, 2020, which sent them into a frenzy to frantically rewrite student behavioral codes within 100 days amidst the backdrop of a global virus pandemic that required nearly all campus administrators to work at home for a period of time. As a presidential election year, 2020 presented the possibility of a new administration and another revision of Title IX interpretation. What is almost certain is that federal regulation of campus conduct policies will fluctuate periodically, and practitioners must be equipped to handle these changes immediately and effectively. For the preservation of their personal relationships and home life, it is also incumbent upon student conduct practitioners to know how to deal with the stresses that come with working in this field. The research and recommendations presented herein are simply the beginning.

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# The Role of Meet Sessions and Breakout Rooms in Creating a Doctoral Learning Community: A Sequential Mixed Methods Study

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*The problem of Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) doctoral student attrition has led institutions to explore solutions to support doctoral students' program completion. According to Tinto's model of institutional departure, students' social and academic integration must be addressed to increase retention. Additionally, Astin's student involvement theory purports that the effectiveness of an engagement strategy is dependent upon the program's ability to increase the amount of time and level of commitment of students. In VLE programs, personal interactions are limited. The purpose of this sequential mixed-methods study is to examine the perceptions of doctoral students and doctoral teaching faculty of weekly voluntary Zoom meet sessions utilizing breakout rooms in VLE doctoral programs. Data were collected from 1) 50 doctoral students (75.8%); 2) 31 (24.4% doctoral faculty teaching online; and 3) a focus group consisting of the Doctoral Students Association (DSA) leadership team. The results indicated that the implementation of a voluntary weekly meet session and the utilization of breakout rooms could facilitate the development of a DLC.*

**Keywords:** attrition, breakout rooms, Doctoral Learning Community (DLC), doctoral student, doctoral program, meet session, online, Virtual Learning Community (VLE)

The terms Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), Virtual Learning Course Management Systems (CMS), and Learning Management Systems (LMS) tend to be used interchangeably (Lopez, 2017), but the term VLE will be used in this paper to characterize a doctoral program at a private not-for-profit university in mid-west America. Based on a 10-year completion rate only 56% of students will complete their doctorate (Council of Graduate Schools, 2020), and program attrition rates in VLEs are often 10%-20% higher than residential programs (Heyman, 2010; Holder, 2007; Muljana & Luo, 2019; Terrell, Snyder, & Dringus, 2009). Smith (2010) documented that VLEs dropout rates across programs range from 40% to 80%. Despite documented high attrition rates across VLEs doctoral programs, little is still known about the reasons for student persistence and attrition (Castelló et al., 2017).

Historically, higher education institutions have intentionally developed policies, procedures, and practices to support students, including structure, to help students actively engage in their program experience (Owolabi, 2018). Research shows that whilst students with higher levels of academic and social integration are more likely to be retained (Tinto, 1975), traditional online course engagement grounded on a unilateral teaching approach which is text based fails to develop a sense of community (Budhai & Skipwith, 2017). Kimbrel and Gantner (2021) argue that further research is needed to determine the specific impacts of instructional strategies and methods to increase student engagement and decrease loneliness of graduate students.

The literature suggests that weekly meet sessions and the utilization of breakout rooms may enhance VLE student engagement as they: (1) are ideal for collaboration and dialogue; (2) can change the pace of the session; (3) provide a safe space for participants; (4) facilitate active dialogue due to small group numbers; and (5) enable the instructor to be present if appropriate to the task in hand (Chandler, 2016; Saltz & Heckman, 2020). Length of time in the breakout rooms can vary according to the task. An impetus to stay on task is that generally each group is required to report back to peers when together in the main room (Saltz & Heckman, 2020). Group membership can be preassigned, strategic, or random allowing students with similar research topics, academic needs or personal needs to be grouped together (Zoom Support, n.d.). The automatic random grouping ensures that doctoral students mix with each other outside their normal learning community.

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to add to the sparse literature on effective VLE instruction in higher education at the doctoral level (Lougheed et al., 2012) by examining the perception of voluntary meet sessions in a VLE doctoral program by doctoral students and doctoral faculty. Further, the contribution of weekly meet sessions and the utilization of breakout rooms to the development of a Doctoral Learning Community (DLC) is explored.

The paper begins by outlining the theoretical framework grounded on Tinto's theory of retention and Astin's theory of student involvement. Previous research related to the development of a VLE learning community is discussed. A rationale for the study's methodology is given. This is followed by a review of the research findings. Finally, a concluding discussion includes possible next steps and limitations.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Tinto's (1975) model of institutional departure considers first an individual's family background, personal experiences, and pre-university education, and second, the academic and social factors as contributory attributes in a student's decision to retain or drop out. Tinto argues that student retention and graduation are as much a reflection of an institution's social and academic environment as it is the character of the student (2012, p.vii) and that student attrition may be due to institutional administrators, faculty, and staff lack of knowledge about the appropriate types of actions, practices, and policies they should adopt.

In a "Framework for Institutional Action," Tinto (2012) places the classroom at the center of his framework. Tinto identifies four conditions from research that are known to promote student success and enhance student retention and graduation: (1) clarity and consistency of high expectations; (2) support to help students achieve expectations specifically in the classroom where success is constructed one course at a time; (3) assess performance and provide frequent feedback; and (4) academic and social engagement. Students are more likely to remain in a program when all four conditions exist. The absence of one undermines the efficacy of the others (Tinto, 2012, p.8). When a student voluntarily withdraws from an institution, as opposed to being academically dismissed, it is because of an incompatibility between the individual student and the institution (Tinto, 1975).

Researchers have applied Tinto's (1975, 1993) work to doctoral programs (Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011) and to VLE programs (Rovai, 2003). Holmes and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2019) established that academic and social integration are intertwined for doctoral students in VLE programs. They assert that program integration is comprised of three factors—faculty integration, student integration, and curriculum integration, which require consistent effort by both the student and the instructor. VLE programs ensure academic interactions (e.g., instruction, receiving timely feedback) as well as non-academic interactions (e.g., social, empathy, care); students' satisfaction with both the quality and nature of peer interactions within the program, both academic and non-academic; and satisfaction a doctoral student has with the quality and relevancy of the doctoral curriculum (Holmes & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2019). Holmes and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2019) research support the earlier research of Pace (1984) who found that a doctoral student's learning and development are dependent upon the quality of effort given and the amount of time invested. The amount of effort directly affects the experience (Pace, 1984). Doctoral students are responsible for their quality of effort, but higher education institutions are responsible for providing the opportunity for a high-quality experience.

Astin's (1984) student involvement theory purports that the effectiveness of a school's engagement program is dependent upon the program's ability to increase the amount of time and level of commitment of students. Astin focused on student involvement as a lead factor in student development. Rooted in the action, or behavior, of being involved, the theory has five postulates: (1) investment of physical and psychological energy, (2) a continuum of involvement, (3) quantitative and qualitative in nature, (4) learning and development are correlated to the quality and quantity of involvement; and (5) effectiveness of policies and practices are dependent on their capacity to increase involvement. The involvement is measured at both the macro and micro level, considering a student's general involvement as well as the involvement for each course, assignment, faculty, etc., and an individual can have various levels of involvement with each area at different times. The fourth and fifth postulates provide a guide for higher education

institutions to develop programming and policies to encourage student involvement and development.

Astin (1984) argues that motivation through involvement is the driving force. Faculty can work to influence the behavior of students to increase involvement; therefore, increasing student development and learning. Involvement strategies must be perceived by doctoral students, particularly working professionals, as essential to their scholarly learning and community development as time can be viewed as their most critical resource (Bean & Netzner, 1985). External entities, such as family, friends, and work, all require allocation of a student's finite resource of time and energy. Even within the education environment, students must navigate how and where to spend their time, whether it be attending class, studying, completing assignments, working with peers or faculty, using student services, or participating in extracurricular activities.

### **Review of Related Literature**

This section first reviews the general topic of the VLE learning environment. This is followed by a review of research with respect to the use of technology tools such as Zoom and the utilization of breakout rooms.

A VLE offers an intercultural learning environment, whereby communication and learning are different than in a face-to-face program because of the technological forum and potential for interactions among diverse students with unique learning needs (Wang, 2007). Garrison and Anderson (2003) in a study of an international student cohort in an EdD in Higher Education VLE program analyzed interactions of three modules and concluded that not all students challenged each other when engaged in discussion and that a 'pseudo-online learning community' formed (Crosta et al., 2016). They recommend that social presence and connections be better established (Crosta et al., 2016) and that the instructor takes an active role in encouraging, supporting, and connecting students via the VLE by presenting opportunities for student interaction (Budhai & Skipwith, 2017; Crosta et al., 2016). Conversely, findings from a study of educational leadership students, including doctoral students (Sherman et al., 2010) highlight that most students agreed that their online coursework was as rigorous as face-to-face learning, that they experienced high levels of interaction with instructors and classmates, that online coursework resulted in greater responsibility for learning, and that they felt they had been part of a learning community.

A wide range of literature exists that examines VLE communities of practice, (also known as virtual learning communities), which puts the emphasis on student VLE interactions that integrate dialogue, collaboration, trust, support, competence, and improvements to professional practice. Since the community of practice theory's inception in 1991 by Lave and Wenger, the theory has evolved to include more than a localized community and is called a landscape of practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). In a VLE doctoral program, the landscape of practice is complex as doctoral students typically engage in both localized and nationalized communities of professional practice. For doctoral students in VLE programs to develop into a learning community, certain components are necessary: students challenging each other respectfully and taking responsibility for their learning, as well as strong cognitive, social, and teacher presence (Garrison & Anderson, 2003).

Instructor presence sometimes may be more important than student interactions in developing learning communities (Drouin, 2008). Wikeley and Muschamp (2004) emphasize the relevance of instructor presence in helping doctoral students find their voice as academic researchers in a scholarly community, and the onus on the instructor to design learning tasks that promote collaboration and development of a learning community. Furthermore, Wikeley and Muschamp (2004) underscore the significance of instructors finding ways to include VLE doctoral students in the research community to address loneliness, isolation, and disconnection. Jairam and Kahl (2012) also emphasize the potential of academic and social support systems in mitigating stress and social isolation. They recommend that doctoral students maintain academic friends, family assistance, and positive relationships with faculty, who are empathetic and supportive.

Familiarity with the VLE impacts course design, delivery, and reception. Ivankova and Stick (2007) conducted a mixed methods study, surveying 278 doctoral VLE students within a Doctor of Education program. They found that doctoral students who persisted felt a high level of comfort with technology and VLE systems; and that asynchronous communication provided the opportunity for deep reflection and created a learning environment conducive to their learning preferences (Ivankova & Stick, 2007). However, VLE doctoral students in other studies have reported a preference for a balanced use of both synchronous and asynchronous communication to enhance their sense of connection with faculty and peers, and ultimately, persistence (Teng, Chen, Kinshuk, & Leo, 2012; Fuller, Risner, Lowder, Hart, & Bachenheimer, 2014).

One VLE academic support strategy studied by Kimbrel and Gantner (2021) centered around instructor videos with quizzes, which they found reduced VLE graduate students' sense of isolation and loneliness. An unexpected study outcome was that students did not need to see their instructor to experience the feelings of connection. Conversely, Guo et al. (2014), found that students wanted to see the instructor's face during the teaching episode in a large-scale Massive Open Online Course (MOOC). Kimbrel and Gantner (2021) suggest that these two discrepant results could reflect student numbers and program size.

Throughout the VLE education literature, it is well documented that VLE doctoral students frequently feel socially isolated and disconnected from the learning environment, (Bollinger & Inan, 2012; Terrell, Snyder, & Dringus, 2009) and that connection with faculty members in the VLE environment through teaching presence (Rockinson-Szapkiw, Baker, Neukrug, & Hanes, 2010) is vital to their successful integration into learning communities (Provident et al., 2015; Rademaker et al., 2016).

## Research Questions

The following research questions guide this inquiry:

**Research Question 1:** What is the perception of voluntary meet sessions in a VLE doctoral program by doctoral students and doctoral faculty?

**Sub-Question 1:** Do weekly voluntary meet sessions contribute to the development of a Doctoral Learning Community (DLC)?

## **Sub-Question 2: Do breakout rooms contribute to the development of a Doctoral Learning Community (DLC)?**

### **Methods**

#### **Study Design**

In order to fulfill the purpose of this study, the most fitting design was a sequential mixed methods approach. Creswell (2015) states that a sequential mixed methods is appropriate when the intent is to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, analyze both data sets and then merge the results of the two data sets with the purpose of comparing the results. The focus of the quantitative component of this study was to gather data that demonstrated doctoral student and doctoral teaching faculty perception of (1) weekly meet sessions; and (2) breakout rooms and their contribution to the development of a DLC. The focus of the qualitative component of this study was to obtain clarification and comprehension of the phenomenon of interest, perception of weekly meet sessions and breakout rooms and their contribution to the development of DLCs. Doctoral Student Association (DSA) leadership team's perception of (1) weekly meet sessions; and (2) breakout rooms and their contribution to the development of a DLC (Pajo, 2018).

#### **Quantitative Component: Survey**

The developed questions for the online non-standardized survey were derived from a review of the empirical and theoretical literature related to student engagement, and program retention (see Appendix A). The doctoral student survey was distributed electronically one week after the conclusion of the summer semester, 2021 to all doctoral students who had participated in a summer semester doctoral course (n= 66).

#### **Quantitative Data Collection**

Data was collected from a purposeful sample of doctoral students (n=66) and doctoral faculty (including adjunct faculty teaching in a doctoral program) (n=127) at a private non-profit specialized higher education institution located in mid-west United States. The response rate was high for both populations, with n=50 (75.8%) student respondents and n=31 (24.4%) doctoral faculty respondents regarding their perception of weekly voluntary meet sessions and breakout rooms; and the contribution of meet sessions and breakout rooms to the development of a DLC (Pajo, 2018). Both doctoral student and doctoral faculty surveys were open for two weeks with a reminder notification sent weekly (see Appendix B).

#### **Quantitative Data Analysis**

Each survey (doctoral students and doctoral teaching faculty) was divided into three sections. The first was a demographic section to collect basic information on gender, race, age, program, and for the doctoral students only, employment hours. The second section was designed to

evaluate doctoral students and doctoral faculty perceptions of voluntary meet sessions. The third section was designed to evaluate doctoral students and doctoral faculty perceptions of breakout rooms. Responses were measured using a 4-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 2 = Somewhat Disagree, 3 = Somewhat Agree, 4 = Strongly Agree). Both the voluntary meet and breakout room sections were nested: if it was indicated that the respondent had not experienced this component in their courses, then the perception questions were not revealed.

An overview of the participants' demographic data is presented in Table 1 (doctoral students) and Table 2 (doctoral teaching faculty).

**Table 1**  
*Doctoral Student Participant Demographics (n = 50)*

Gender	Female n=37 74%	Male n=13 26%	Other n=0		
Race	Asian n=3 6%	Black/African American n=14 28%	Hispanic/ Latino n=1 2%	White n=30 60%	
Age	20-29 n=3 6%	30-39 n=8 16%	40-49 n=21 42%	50-59 n=17 34%	60-69 n=1 2%
Program	DBA n=13 26%	DHA n=12 24%	DPS n=3 6%	EdD n=22 44%	
Employment Hours	None n=3 6%	1-20 n=2 4%	21-30 n=3 6%	31-40 n=18 36%	More than 40 n=24 48%

**Table 2**  
*Doctoral Faculty Participant Demographics (n = 31)*

Gender	Female n= 15 48%	Male n=16 52%	Other n=0		
Race	Asian n=0	Black/African American n=6 19%	Hispanic or Latino n=0	White n=24 77%	
Age	30-39 n=2 6%	40-49 n=7 23%	50-59 n= 11 36%	60-69 n=8 26%	70-79 n=3 9%
Program	DBA n=13 42%	DHA n=5 16%	DPS n=4 13%	EdD n=9 29%	
Employment Status	Full-time Faculty n=4 13%	Adjunct Faculty n=23 74%	University Administrator n=4 13%		

## **Qualitative Component: Focus Group**

The purpose of the focus group interview was to provide indepth insights on doctoral student's survey responses (Pajo, 2018). The Doctoral Student Association (DSA) committee has unique insight into doctoral student motivations because of their exposure to a broad cross-section of doctoral students. The DSA committee consists of seven members, and all responded positively to an invitation to participate in a focus group. In actuality, five committee members, representing the four doctoral programs (DBA, DHA, DPS, EdD) participated in the focus group which was conducted during the Fall, 2021 semester.

## **Qualitative Data Collection**

The data collection was performed online through synchronous interactions using the Zoom video conferencing platform (Zoom Video Communications Inc., 2016). The 45 minutes discussion was recorded after receiving participants' consent. The created discussion guide was grounded on doctoral student survey responses and served as the blueprint for the focus group session. These questions (see Appendix C) included the number of courses completed with voluntary meet sessions, how participants define a DLC, whether voluntary meet sessions or other aspects of the doctoral program contribute to building a DLC, and an overall assessment of voluntary meet sessions. Additional questions posed to participants included responsibilities that influenced participation in voluntary meet sessions, perspectives on attending versus watching a recording, experiences with breakout rooms, and suggestions for faculty to enhance course engagement and a DLC, and then questions exploring the respondent's opinion about certain outcomes from the survey.

## **Qualitative Data Analysis**

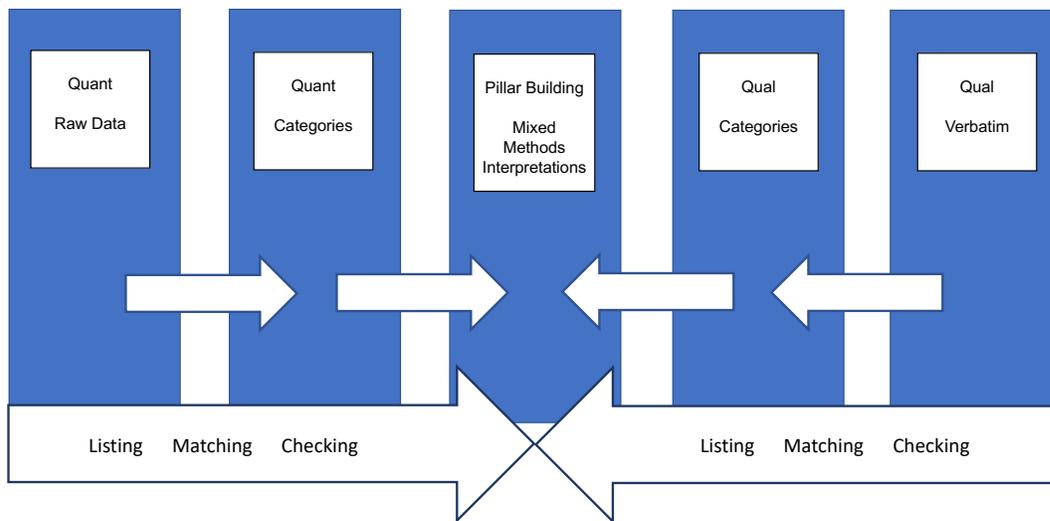
The focus group recording was transcribed verbatim and followed an inductive and iterative process. We thematically analyzed narratives from the focus group. The paper authors were involved in discussions of preliminary thematic findings and throughout the data interpretation process. Credibility as a source of trustworthiness was ensured through prolonged engagement and observation. Peer debriefing was another way of ensuring the credibility, by discussing the preliminary qualitative findings as well as the mixed method interpretation findings with colleagues having expertise in qualitative and mixed methods research in order to enhance the transferability of the findings to other similar populations and contexts.

## **Mixed Methods Integration**

Once quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed separately a comparison strategy was used to combine quantitative and qualitative results to interpret how the merged results agreed (correspondence, similarities), offered complementary information, or contradicted (disagreement or dissonance). The purpose of the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings was to compare and contrast both components to provide a comprehensive picture of the role of meet sessions and breakout rooms in contributing to student engagement

and the development of a Doctoral Learning Community (DLC) (Johnson et al., 2019). We first used a weaving technique, inspired by Fetter et al. [2013; 2015], that aims to narratively group both quantitative and qualitative findings under a mixed methods interpretation. For this interpretation process, we utilized the four stages of the pillar integration process (Figure. 1) to visually compare quantitative and qualitative components and integrate them into a joint display.

**Figure 1**  
*Pillar Integration Process*



*Adapted from Johnson et al., 2019*

### Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings into Mixed Method Interpretations

Using the pillar integration process (PiP), a transparent and rigorous four-stage technique for integrating and presenting qualitative and quantitative findings in joint display (Johnson et al., 2019) we combined both quantitative and qualitative data and categories (findings) to describe how both doctoral students and doctoral teaching faculty perceptions of voluntary weekly meet sessions and use of breakout rooms contributed to the development of a DLC.

**Table 3**

*Comparison of Doctoral Students and Doctoral Faculty Perceptions of Weekly Voluntary Meet Sessions (1=strongly disagree; 2 = somewhat disagree; 3 = somewhat agree; 4 = strongly agree)*

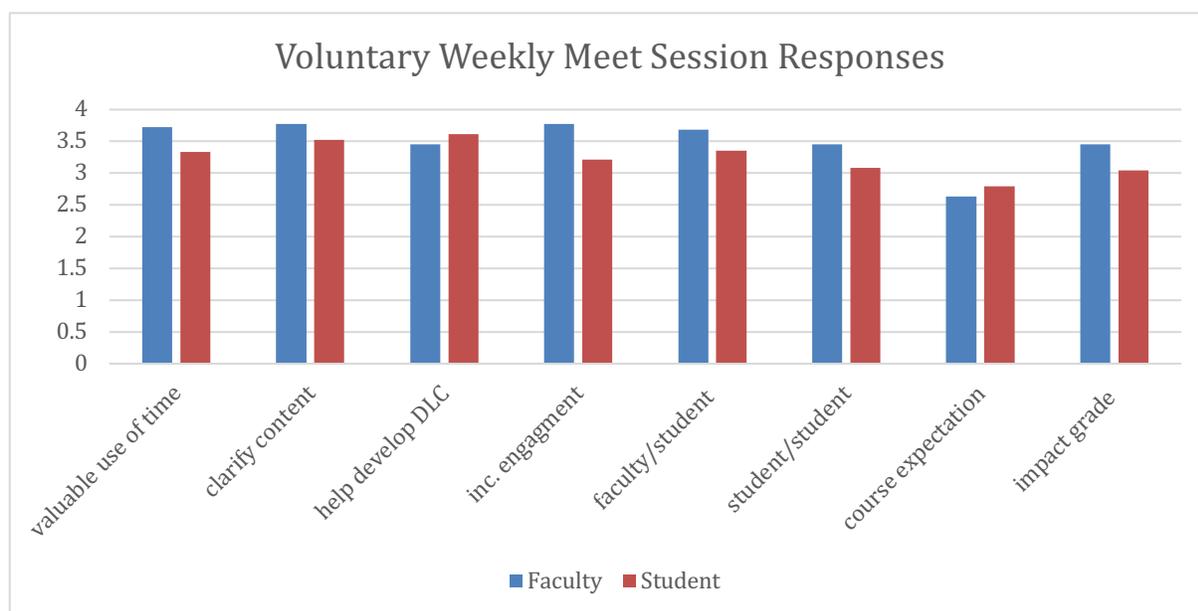
	Faculty (n=22)	Student (n=48)	
	Mean	Mean	
	Response	Response	p-value**

Valuable use of time	3.73	3.33	0.0166***
Help to clarify content	3.77	3.52	0.0852
Contribute to development of DLC	3.45	3.62*	0.7508
Increase engagement in course	3.77	3.21	0.0048***
Increase faculty/student interaction	3.68	3.35	0.1335
Increase student/student interaction	3.45	3.08	0.1139
Meets are expectation (obligation)	2.64	2.79	0.5513
Attendance correlates with (has + impact on) grade	3.45	3.04*	0.1270

\* data set included 1 non-response, n=47 \*\*two-tailed, two-sample t-test \*\*\* difference in means is statistically significant,  $\alpha = 0.05$

**Figure 2**

*Comparison of Doctoral Students and Doctoral Faculty Perceptions of Meet Sessions (n = 22, faculty; n = 48, student)*



**Table 4**

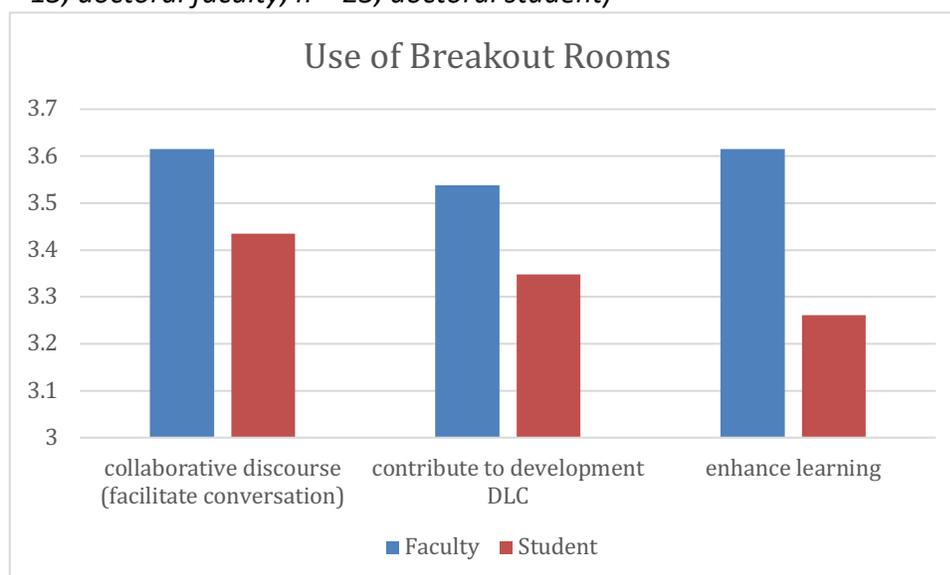
*Comparison of Doctoral Students and Doctoral Faculty Perceptions of Zoom Breakout Rooms (1=strongly disagree; 2 = somewhat disagree; 3 =somewhat agree; 4 = strongly agree)*

	Faculty (n=13) Mean Response	Student (n=23) Mean Response	p-value*
Collaborative discourse (facilitate conversation)	3.62	3.43	0.3608 not sig.
Contribute to development of DLC	3.54	3.35	0.4052 not sig.
Enhance learning	3.62	3.26	0.1864 not sig.

\*two-tailed, two-sample t-test,  $\alpha = 0.05$

**Figure 3**

*Comparison of Doctoral Students and Doctoral Faculty Perceptions of Zoom Breakout Rooms (n = 13, doctoral faculty; n = 23, doctoral student)*



### Quantitative Findings

Each survey (doctoral students and doctoral teaching faculty) was divided into three sections. Demographic data from the first section is presented in Table 1 (doctoral students) and Table 2 (doctoral faculty). The second section was designed to evaluate doctoral students and doctoral faculty perceptions of voluntary meet sessions, with 48 students (96%) and 22 faculty (71%) indicating that they had attended (doctoral student) or held (doctoral faculty) weekly voluntary meet sessions. The follow-up perception questions were only revealed to those respondents that indicated “yes” that they had experienced weekly voluntary meet sessions. Responses were measured using a 4-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 2 = Somewhat Disagree, 3 = Somewhat Agree, 4 = Strongly Agree); the mean responses for both student (n=48) and faculty (n=22) are presented in Table 3. The tabulated responses do not reflect all data collected; the

table includes responses to questions that were included on both surveys. Appendix A has the full set of student and faculty survey questions.

The doctoral student responses indicated that doctoral students do not attend the weekly voluntary meet sessions out of a sense of obligation; rather, doctoral students attend because they find them to be a valuable use of their time, help to clarify content, increase faculty-student interactions, and contribute to the development of a DLC. It was interesting that mean student response for the development of a DLC (3.62) was greater than mean student response for both increased student-student (3.08) and faculty-student interactions (3.35). This prompted us to further explore how doctoral students defined a DLC in the focus group session.

Likewise, the faculty responses indicated that faculty do not hold weekly voluntary meet sessions because they feel it is a course expectation; rather they offer the sessions because they find them to be a valuable use of their time (3.73), help to clarify content (3.77), increase engagement with the course (3.77), and increase their interaction with students (3.68). It was interesting that the faculty place greater value on content clarification and increased faculty-student interaction than students. This may indicate that they view the meet sessions as more of a mechanism to convey content information than to facilitate peer-to-peer interactions.

A two-tailed, two-sample t-test ( $H_0: \mu_{\text{faculty}} - \mu_{\text{student}} = 0$ ,  $H_a: \mu_{\text{faculty}} - \mu_{\text{student}} \neq 0$ ) was performed to see if there were significant differences between the mean doctoral teaching faculty and mean doctoral student responses. There was strong agreement between the faculty and student responses with the exception of valuable use of time ( $p=0.0166$ ) and increased engagement in the course (0.0048). It is not surprising that faculty perception of 'valuable use of time' is greater than student perception; facilitating a meet session is an instructional component in most courses at the university (i.e. faculty may view the meet as part of their job) whereas 84% of the students indicated that they work 30+ hours a week (i.e. time is a precious commodity and doctoral students view the meet sessions as something additional). It is also not surprising that faculty perception of 'increased engagement in course' was greater than students' perceptions. Faculty facilitate (engage in) every live meet session. In a survey question (not reflected in the table above), 44% of the students responded that they preferred the recorded session over the live session. As nearly half of the students prefer to utilize the recorded session, this could impact their perception of engagement in the course.

The last section of the survey was designed to evaluate doctoral students and doctoral faculty perceptions of breakout rooms, with 23 students (46%) and 13 faculty (42%) indicating that they participated in (doctoral student) or utilized (doctoral teaching faculty) breakout rooms during a meet session. The follow-up perception questions were only revealed to those respondents that indicated "yes" that they had experienced breakout rooms. Responses were measured using a 4-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 2 = Somewhat Disagree, 3 = Somewhat Agree, 4 = Strongly Agree); the mean responses for both faculty ( $n=13$ ) and student ( $n=23$ ) are presented in Table 4.

Both doctoral students and doctoral teaching faculty report a positive experience with breakout rooms. The results of the two-tailed, two-sample t-test ( $H_0: \mu_{\text{faculty}} - \mu_{\text{student}} = 0$ ,  $H_a: \mu_{\text{faculty}} - \mu_{\text{student}} \neq 0$ ) indicated no significant differences between the mean doctoral student and doctoral faculty responses. This data may prompt more doctoral teaching faculty to explore the use of breakout rooms during their meet sessions. The tabulated responses do not reflect all data

collected; the table includes responses to questions that were included on both surveys. Appendix A has the full set of doctoral student and doctoral reaching faculty survey questions.

## **Qualitative Findings**

Three main themes are presented: 1) contribution of voluntary weekly meet sessions to the development of a Doctoral Learning Community (DLC); 2) utilization of time; and 3) student engagement. Doctoral students' experience of breakout rooms is also presented.

### ***Contribution of Voluntary Weekly Meet Sessions to the Development of a DLC.***

Participants varied in their experience of voluntary meet sessions and the regularity of the sessions. Several doctoral students used the word "collaborative" to define a DLC but there was consensus agreement with the program's definition of a DLC: A scaffold enabling doctoral students to develop scholarly dispositions and knowledge through varied formal and informal activities (Berry, 2017; Wenger, 1998; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Participants highlighted the interactive, supportive, relationship building, communication and knowledge sharing role of meet sessions in contributing to the DLC.

"I think there are a thousand reasons. The one that comes to mind is it makes you responsible. You have a chance to communicate. It is that kind of encouragement. It is more of the support, and you know the instructor cares so that is just my take on it."

"I have more interaction with my peers in the voluntary meet sessions than I do in the doctoral dialogues. It has helped build my DLC. I do much better in the classes where we have had the voluntary meet sessions."

Other aspects of the program that help to build a DLC were identified as the Doctoral Student Association (DSA), study groups, peer assignments, and the dissertation writing boot camp.

"Out of the bootcamp, every Saturday we have a group that still, to this day, get together. This is my tribe."

"When I took the applied statistics second course, we were assigned study groups and our assigned study group grew from the folks we were assigned to, to also include folks in other stats sections. That became our tribe."

"I was matched up with a group of people, and out of that class the two people that I still talk to are not in my program. I have one in the DBA program and one in the DHA program. We still talk through different classes and help each other. I purposely joined the DSA to help build my learning community."

***Utilization of Time.*** All participants thought that attending a meet session was a good use of their time and agreed that the sessions helped to develop doctoral student and doctoral

teaching faculty relationships although they did not perceive attendance at meet sessions as impacting their course grade. However, challenges such as different time zones, conflict with work schedule, unforeseen traffic commuting issues were identified as barriers to attending the voluntary sessions. In most courses voluntary meet sessions are recorded which respondents appreciated as it enables them the convenience of pausing a recording. One respondent stated that they are less focused and less attentive when watching a recording.

***Student engagement.*** Respondents made several suggestions as to how faculty could further enhance student engagement and build a DLC: active professor participation and interaction; attentive and compassionate professors; ownership of course design; structured course sequence; increase study groups and social events.

“Seeing them outside of school connects you outside of the classroom and connects you more to them.”

“I felt that this was my most connected term. The weekly face-to face sessions and meeting with each other is what built the rapport for me. I think it is the option to have groups as well that builds the Doctoral Learning Community because you can identify with classmates in the group, and I think that transcends from class to class.”

***Experience of Breakout Rooms.*** Only one respondent regularly experienced breakout rooms in their doctoral program although all had an opinion as to the contribution of breakout rooms to the development of peer relationships and the building of a DLC. Interaction, focused collaboration, and the development of connections were highlighted as helping to facilitate a DLC.

“What I found interesting is that we’d all break out and normally when we came back, we all had different ideas about whatever we were discussing.”

“Offering it allows students the opportunity if they want it and it creates connections.”

“I felt like I actually really got to know a lot of the people. We always got shuffled into different ones, so we always worked with someone else. I would honestly probably attend more voluntary meet sessions if I knew there was going to be a breakout room. I want more of that peer interaction.”

“If there was a breakout room, I was more inclined to stay during the duration instead of tuning out.”

## Discussion

Data analysis revealed that whilst weekly voluntary meet sessions were the norm for the courses completed by most survey respondents this was not the majority experience of the focus group participants. This may reflect when a course was completed. The survey went to all doctoral students in the four doctoral programs irrespective of how far into the program they were whilst the focus group participants were at or near the end of taught classes. Doctoral students attend

meet sessions because they find them to be a valuable use of their time, help to clarify content, increase faculty-student interactions, and contribute to the development of a DLC. They do not attend meet sessions out of a sense of obligation.

In comparison to doctoral students, doctoral teaching faculty responses indicate that they view the meet sessions as more of a mechanism to convey content information than to facilitate peer-peer interactions. In common with doctoral students, they find voluntary weekly meet sessions to be a valuable use of their time; help to clarify content; increase course engagement; and interaction with students.

Whilst active synchronous involvement in meet sessions was the preference of the majority of doctoral students the benefits of recorded sessions were also highlighted i.e., option to pause the recording, overcomes time zone differences, ameliorates a conflicting work schedule, avoids stress due to traffic issues to and from work, enables participation even if there is a personal conflict with the scheduled day/time. Focus group participants pointed out that watching the recording is less impactful because it results in a loss of focus and attention.

Aside from voluntary meet sessions and recordings, the researchers also assessed participants' experiences with breakout rooms with just under half of doctoral students and doctoral teaching faculty indicating that they experienced breakout rooms during a voluntary meet session. Overall, survey respondees and focus group participants felt that breakout rooms influence peer relationships and the development of a DLC because they foster peer interaction, focused collaboration, and develop connections. Focus group participants expanded on survey responses by suggesting that in order to further enhance engagement with courses and build a DLC, faculty must ensure instructor participation is consistent within and across doctoral programs and courses.

Overall, both doctoral student and doctoral teaching faculty perceived that voluntary weekly breakout sessions in a VLE doctoral program are a good use of their time and contribute to the development of a DLC, if we consider that the great majority of means were above 3, on the 4-point Likert scale. Both the quantitative and qualitative results were highly consensual in identifying the positive contribution of voluntary meet sessions to relationship building, doctoral student and doctoral faculty relationship, doctoral student to doctoral student relationship. The qualitative results nuanced, deepened, and even added new elements (e.g., role of meet session in facilitating knowledge sharing) to the quantitative results. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings drew a full portrait of the continuum of doctoral students and doctoral teaching faculty experience of both voluntary meet sessions and the use of breakout rooms.

### **Summary/Theoretical Significance**

This study further reinforced the research by scholars who recommend that presence and connections should be better established by instructors and that they take an active role in encouraging, supporting, and connecting students via the VLE by presenting opportunities for student interaction (Budhai & Skipwith, 2017; Crosta et al., 2016; Drounin, 2008; Provident et al., 2015; Rademaker et al., 2016; Rockinson-Szapkiw, Baker, Neukrug, & Hanes, 2010; Wikeley & Muschamp, 2004;). Further, meet sessions and the utilization of breakout rooms are perceived by both doctoral students and faculty as contributing to the development of a DLC by presenting

opportunities for doctoral students to challenge each other respectfully (Garrison & Anderson, 2003).

### **Strengths and Limitations**

As far as we are aware, this is the first study to examine doctoral students and doctoral teaching faculty perceptions of voluntary weekly meet sessions and the utilization of breakout rooms in VLE doctoral programs. This mixed methods study led to a gain in complementary and rich data, providing a comprehensive picture of doctoral students learning experiences in meet sessions and breakout rooms and the development of a DLC. However, the study is limited by four factors: 1) data were collected via an online non-standardized survey; 2) the integration of doctoral student data was impacted by the unequal sample size (50 in the quantitative component; and 5 in the qualitative part); 3) the study focused on doctoral students who were enrolled in one of four VLE doctoral courses during the summer semester and were also at different points of their program; and 4) the recommendations and implications derived from this study may have limited application especially since research demonstrates different completion rates, time to completion, and program characteristics based on different disciplines (Golde, 2005).

### **Implications For Future Research**

This study focused on doctoral student and doctoral teaching faculty perceptions of voluntary meet sessions in a VLE doctoral program, and the role of meet sessions and breakout rooms in contributing to the development of a DLC. Subsequent research is necessary to explore the influence of contextual enablers/barriers (e.g., nature of the institution, resources, structure, organizational culture) and those that are related to doctoral students and doctoral teaching faculty themselves (e.g., tenure/adjunct faculty, work structure, competing demands) when examining the role of meet sessions and breakout rooms in developing a DLC.

### **Conclusion**

Implementation of a voluntary weekly meet session and the utilization of breakout rooms can facilitate the development of a DLC. Other VLE doctoral programs seeking to encourage DLC development could implement this andragogical strategy.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Doctoral Student Survey**

*Thank you for participating in our survey. Your feedback is important.*

For information:

- The weekly voluntary meet session is a synchronistic one-hour zoom session facilitated by the course instructor.
- Doctoral Learning Community (DLC) is defined as the scaffold enabling doctoral students to develop scholarly dispositions and knowledge through varied formal and informal activities (Berry, 2017; Wenger, 1998; Wenger & Snyder, 2000).

#### **Section 1: Demographic data**

1. Gender-male/female/other/prefer not to respond
2. Race-American Indian or Alaska Native/Hispanic or Latino/Asian/Black or African American/Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander/ White/Other
3. Age -20-29/30-39/40-49/50-59/60-69/70-79
4. Doctoral program-EdD/DBA/DHA/DPS
5. What stage of the program are you in? Year 1-Course work, Year 2- course work, Year3- course work

#### **Section 2: Doctoral Student Perception of Voluntary Meet Sessions**

1. They are a valuable use of my time
2. They help me feel more comfortable with my classmates
3. They help to clarify course content
4. They contribute to the development of a Doctoral Learning Community (DLC) in a virtual environment
5. They help to increase my engagement with the course
6. They help to increase my engagement with classmates
7. They were a factor in me remaining in the course
8. They were a factor in me remaining in the program
9. They provide practice for doctoral students to engage in collaborative discourse
10. They are important in developing doctoral faculty/doctoral student interaction
11. They are important in developing doctoral student/doctoral student interaction
12. Attending a voluntary weekly meet session had a positive impact on my course grade
13. I attend most scheduled voluntary meet sessions
14. I only attend mandatory meet sessions
15. I prefer to watch recordings of the voluntary weekly meet session
16. I feel obligated to attend voluntary weekly meet sessions
17. I enjoy attending voluntary weekly meet sessions
18. I have used Zoom breakout rooms in voluntary meet sessions

#### **Section 3: Doctoral Student Perception of Zoom Breakout Rooms**

1. They facilitate collaborative discourse
2. They are a valuable use of my time
3. They contribute to the development of a virtual Doctoral Learning Community (DLC)
4. They enhance learning in a virtual environment
5. I enjoy the small group interactions on breakout rooms

## **Appendix B**

### **Doctoral Faculty Survey**

*Thank you for participating in our survey. Your feedback is important.*

For information:

- The weekly voluntary meet session is a synchronistic one-hour zoom session facilitated by the course instructor.
- Doctoral Learning Community (DLC) is defined as the scaffold enabling doctoral students to develop scholarly dispositions and knowledge through varied formal and informal activities (Berry, 2017; Wenger, 1998; Wenger & Snyder, 2000).

#### **Section 1: Demographic data**

1. Gender-male/female/other/prefer not to respond
2. Race-American Indian or Alaska Native/Hispanic or Latino/Asian/Black or African American/Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander/ White/Other
3. Age -20-29/30-39/40-49/50-59/60-69/70-79
4. Credential-DBA/DBH/DHA/DM/DNP/EdD/PhD/Other
5. Doctoral program-EdD/DBA/DHA/DPS
6. Employment Status-Faculty/Adjunct Faculty/University Administrator

#### **Section 2: Faculty Perception of Voluntary Weekly Meet Sessions**

1. Do you hold voluntary weekly meet sessions?
2. They are a mandatory program requirement
3. They are a program expectation
4. They are a valuable use of my time
5. They contribute to the development of a Doctoral Learning Community (DLC) in a virtual environment
6. They contribute to the development of a doctoral student's social presence in a virtual environment
7. They provide practice for doctoral students to engage in collaborative discourse
8. They help to clarify course content
9. They help to increase doctoral student engagement with the course
10. They are important in developing doctoral faculty/doctoral student interaction
11. There is a positive relationship between attendance at voluntary weekly meet sessions and course grade
12. I have used Zoom breakout rooms in voluntary meet sessions

#### **Section 3: Faculty Perception of Zoom Breakout Rooms**

1. They facilitate collaborative discourse
2. They contribute to the development of a virtual Doctoral Learning Community (DLC)
3. They enhance learning in a virtual environment

## **Appendix C**

### **Focus Group Questions**

1. In a recent survey completed by 50 doctoral students (DBA-13, DHA-11, DPS-2 & EdD-22), 48 students (96%) said that they had completed a course with voluntary meet sessions.
  - a.) We are interested to know whether all the courses you have so far completed had voluntary meet sessions?
  - b.) Were voluntary meet sessions the norm in all courses or an exception?
2. 83% of survey respondees identified voluntary meet sessions as contributing to the building of a Doctoral Learning Community (DLC).
  - a.) How would you define a DLC and how do you think that the voluntary meet sessions contribute to the building of a DLC?
  - b.) Can you identify any other aspects of your program that help to build a DLC?
3. 48% of survey respondees work more than 40 hours per week and 48% have children under 20 years old. Nevertheless, virtually all survey respondees reported that attending voluntary meet sessions is a good use of their time, enhances faculty and student relationships; student to student relationships; and contributes to grade enhancement.
  - a.) Would you agree/disagree with this overall assessment?
  - b.) Do personal/professional responsibilities, or both impact your ability to participate in voluntary meet sessions?
  - c.) Is there an impactful difference between participating in a voluntary meet session and watching the recording?
4. Just under 50% of respondees have completed a course where zoom breakout rooms were used. This was perceived as a positive experience.
  - a.) Have you experienced the use of breakout rooms in your course?
  - b.) Do you think zoom breakout rooms contribute to the development of peer relationships and the building of a DLC?
5. Finally, as doctoral student representatives at \_ University are you able to make any other suggestions that faculty can implement in addition to Canvas course content that would enhance your engagement with the course and build a Doctoral Learning Community?

# Exploring Perceptions of Urban High School Students Related to Their High Priority Counseling Needs

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*There is a growing emphasis to improve underserved students' academic, social-emotional, and career development as schools strive to deliver comprehensive student services. The purpose of this study is to explore urban high school students' perspectives on improving academic and counseling services. The results and implications for educational leaders and policymakers are designed to extend school leaders' and counselors' knowledge about delivering effective school counseling programs. Particularly, the findings allow urban school principals and school counselors to identify the high and low program needs of urban students to become college and career-ready. School leaders and counselors can apply the findings of this study to create a systemic and comprehensive student service in their schools by looking at time allocation in prevention versus responsive counseling services.*

**Keywords:** Principal and Counselor Partnership, High Priority Counseling Needs, Urban Schools,

## Introduction and Purpose

Improving the academic, social-emotional, and career development of all students is a fundamental aspect of implementing comprehensive academic and counseling services (Geesa, Elam, Mayes, McConnell, and McDonald, 2019). In this study, urban high school students' perceptions of their comprehensive school counseling needs were explored because the amount and type of support students receive from their school counseling services is important to support student success. Both school leaders and counselors are encouraged to be familiar with students' complex academic and counseling needs to appropriately support the whole child's development (Darling-Hammond, and Cook-Harvey, 2018). School leaders and counselors have been utilizing various data, such as student achievement test scores, math and reading levels, and attendance data to determine the academic levels of students. While this information is useful, they do not tell the whole story regarding underserved urban students' wholistic needs (Fowler, and Brown, 2018). Therefore, to better understand urban high school students' perceptions of academic, social, emotional, college, and career readiness-related needs, this research was undertaken to explore what urban students need from a school counseling program from school counselors and principals

Based on The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model (ASCA, 2019) school counselors are encouraged to deliver comprehensive programs that aim to promote the academic, social/emotional, and career development of all students. However, there are several barriers to the effective implementation of school counseling services including (a) a lack of funding, (b) a very high student-to-school-counselor ratio, (c) inadequate collaboration, and consultation among key stakeholders (Chandler, Burnham, Riechel, Dahir, Stone, Oliver, Bledsoe, 2018; Patel and Clinedinst, 2021). One additional barrier to the successful implementation of school counseling services can be attributed to the lack of professional development activities (White, 2019).

Since there are well-reported challenges to implementing comprehensive school counseling programs, utilizing a systemic need assessment can be considered an effective strategy to plan and implement targeted school counseling services (Warren and Mauk, 2019). Particularly, need assessment results can be instrumental to identify high-priority student services to develop intentional and meaningful counseling practices that lead toward a systemic change. Therefore, in this quantitative explorative study, urban high school students were asked to complete a comprehensive need assessment related to their academic, social, emotional, college, and career readiness needs. Particularly, the following research questions guided this study to explore what urban high school students need from a comprehensive school counseling program.

1. What are the highest and lowest college and career readiness needs as perceived by urban high school students?
2. What are the highest and lowest social and emotional development needs as perceived by urban high school students?
3. What are the highest and lowest academic development needs as perceived by urban high school students?

4. How urban high school students' perceptions of their high-priority counseling needs are associated with special education, English language learner, parent education, and race?

## Literature Review

### Comprehensive School Counseling Services

Comprehensive school counseling programs use a holistic and collaborative approach to help students' academic, social, emotional, and career development (ASCA, 2019). Aligned with the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model (2012), the Connecticut Comprehensive School Counseling Framework (CCSCF) (2020) indicates that implementing a comprehensive school counseling program has many beneficial outcomes. For instance, when students participate in comprehensive school counseling services, they experience improved academic performance and success, better social relationships, improved decision-making and problem-solving, and a better understanding of careers and postsecondary options (CCSCF, 2020; Yavuz, 2014,).

Moreover, Brown, Trusty (2005) reported that the majority of state departments of education have adopted comprehensive school counseling programs as the model for school counseling programs in their states to improve all disadvantaged students' academic, personal, social, emotional, and career development. Particularly, the six state-level studies (Connecticut, Missouri, Nebraska, Rhode Island, Utah, and Wisconsin) focused on measuring the impacts of comprehensive school counseling programs provide valuable evidence of the relationship between positive student educational outcomes and implementing school counseling programs (Carey & Dimmitt, 2012).

### Academic Development and Comprehensive School Counseling

Both school leaders and school counselors are accountable to improve student academic development, and school success (Dimmitt, 2009). Improving the academic development of students is a significant component of a comprehensive school counseling program (Parzych, Generali, and Yavuz, 2021). Particularly, academic development goals provide the foundation for the acquisition of skills, habits of mind, and knowledge that contribute to effective learning in school (CCSCF, 2020). As a part of the comprehensive school counseling services students are supported to employ strategies to achieve success in school and understand the relationship of academics to the world of work, and to life at home and in the community.

Particularly, ASCA (2019) identified the school counselor's role to support student's academic success. These responsibilities include but are not limited to: (1) Delivering a school counseling program based on data identifying student needs, (2) Working with administration, teachers, and other school staff to create a school environment encouraging academic success and striving to one's potential (Stone & Clark, 2001), (3) Establishing data analysis methods to identify and target systemic barriers deterring equitable access, (4) Working to establish student opportunities for academic remediation as needed and (5) Delivering information to students

and teachers within the school counseling curriculum on best practices in mindsets and behaviors (i.e., learning strategies, self-management skills, social skills) critical in academic success.

### **Social and Emotional Development and Comprehensive School Counseling**

In addition to the academic development issues, more recently state policymakers, educational leaders and counselors have placed increasing importance on the social and emotional development of students (Lawson, McKenzie, Becker, Selby, and Hoover, 2019). As indicated by The Connecticut Comprehensive School Counseling Framework (2020), social-emotional development goals provide the foundation for social-emotional growth as students' progress through school and into adulthood. Social-emotional development contributes to academic success by helping students understand and respect themselves and others, acquire effective interpersonal skills, understand safety and survival skills, and develop into contributing members of society (p.5).

School counselors serve as the first line of defense in identifying and addressing student social/emotional needs within the school setting (ASCA, 2019). Since school counselors have unique training in helping students with social and emotional issues, they play a critical role in supporting student's social/emotional development by collaborating with school leaders and classroom teachers to provide the school counseling curriculum to all students through direct instruction, team-teaching (ASCA, 2019). School counselors also provide lesson plans for learning activities or units in classrooms aimed at social/ emotional development. A comprehensive framework approach requires collaboration with students, families the community, faculty, and administration. Therefore, school counselors work collaboratively with school stakeholders to select and implement appropriate strategies and resources in a school counseling program to facilitate K–12 students' social/emotional development (Dahir, Burnham, Stone, Cobb, 2010).

### **College and Career Readiness and Comprehensive School Counseling**

The third domain of a comprehensive school counseling program focuses on the college readiness and career development of all students. According to the Connecticut Comprehensive School Counseling Framework (2020), career development goals provide the foundation for the acquisition of skills, habits of mind, and knowledge that enable students to make a successful transition from school to the world of work and as careers changes across the lifespan. School counselors collaborate and consult with school leaders and teachers to ensure that students participate in a comprehensive plan of career awareness, exploration, and preparation activities (Paolini, 2019).

ASCA (2019) also indicates that school counselors play a critical role in students' career development by (1) helping students understand the connection between school and the world of work, (2) Working with teachers to integrate career education learning into the curricula, (3) Providing and advocating for students' college and career awareness pre-K through postsecondary (4) Collaborating with administration, teachers, staff and decision-makers to create a postsecondary-readiness and college-going culture. They also systemically advise students on multiple postsecondary pathways (Deslonde, and Becerra, 2018).

School counselors recognize that each student, regardless of background, possesses unique interests, abilities, and goals, which will lead to future opportunities. Therefore, school counselors assist students in completing the steps necessary for participating in college access programs or postsecondary programs, such as registering for tests or applying for financial aid (ASCA, 2019). Moreover, with support from key stakeholders like administrators, teachers, and parents, school counselors and school psychologists can work collaboratively to increase students' college and career readiness (Hines, Vega, Mayes, Harris, and Mack, 2019).

Taking everything into account, school counselors are the catalyst for establishing collaborative partnerships that help students' academic, social, emotional, and career development (ASCA, 2019, Bruce and Bridgeland, 2012). However, it is noted that many school leaders do not receive proper training to support and evaluate school counselors (Geesa, Elam, Mayes, McConnell, and McDonald, 2019). To promote equitable treatment of all students, and promote access to rigorous academic courses and learning paths for college and career for all students, school counselors and school leaders are encouraged to collaborate (ASCA, 2019)

### **Equity for All Students and School Counseling Services**

In 2018, a polling organization Gallup interviewed 1,892 superintendents about their priorities across the American education system. According to these survey results, superintendents are most likely to see "improving the performance of disadvantaged students" as a challenge for their districts. At least eight in 10 strongly agree or agree that improving the academic performance of underserved students (89%) is considered the main challenge that K-12 schools face. The underrepresented groups face unique academic, social, and emotional challenges in schools. Disadvantaged students tend to struggle more in their college and career readiness process (Yavuz, 2014).

Significant progress has been made over the past four decades in improving academic achievement and college readiness of historically underrepresented groups in U.S. schools and colleges (Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, and Kuh, 2008). Several research-supported resources and strategies are available to help underrepresented students prepare for college and succeed in school. Collaboration, consultation, and coordination among school leaders, counselors, and teachers are crucial to meeting these challenges and balancing these priorities (ASCA, 2012). While school leaders focus on finding additional resources and outside partnerships, K-12 school counselors are encouraged to act as advocates, consultants, coordinators, collaborators, managers of resources, and facilitators to increase all student outcomes (ASCA, 2012). Particularly, in this study, underserved students are categorized into four main groups (1) Students with Disabilities, (2) Bilingual Students, (3) First Generation-College Bound Students, and (4) Students of Color.

### **Advocacy for Students with Disabilities**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires public schools to provide a free, appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment for all students. However, previous research indicates that instead of receiving proper educational services and support in the least restrictive environment, children with disabilities are often enrolled in more restrictive

treatment environments with limited support (Davis, 2018). Students with disabilities and particularly, children with emotional disabilities (ED) live lives of desperation, depression, and rejection. Hurwitz, Cohen, and Perry (2021) also reported that students with disabilities are disciplined at disproportionately high rates, despite federal laws designed to ensure disciplinary protection.

Based on the Report on the Condition of Education 2021, the number of students ages 3–21 who received special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was 7.3 million, or 14 percent of all public school students. Among students receiving special education services, the most common category of disability (33 percent) was specific learning disabilities. Besides specific learning disabilities, The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act defined disabilities include: autism, deaf-blind, developmental delay, emotional disturbance, hearing impairments (including deafness), intellectual disability (formerly mental retardation), orthopedic impairments, other health impairments, speech or language impairments, traumatic brain injury, or visual impairments.

A study conducted among 948 school counselors indicates that during the COVID-19 pandemic, counselors did not manage to carry out direct work with students on social-emotional topics. Counselors reported that they often spent their valuable time with non-counseling administrative needs (Heled and Davidovitch, 2022). Inappropriate administrative responsibilities for the school counselor include but are not limited to: (1) hallway monitoring (2) coordinating state tests, and (3) covering classrooms for absent teachers. Instead of spending time with non-counseling tasks, school counselors are recommended to provide school counseling curriculum lessons, individual and/or group counseling to students with special needs within the scope of the school counseling program (ASCA, 2019).

### **Advocacy for English Language Learners (ELL)**

According to the Report on the Condition of Education 2021, there are an estimated 5 million children in U.S. public schools learning the English language. In other words, over 10 percent of K-12 students in the U.S. are second language learners. Under civil rights law, schools are obligated to ensure that English language learners (ELLs) have equal access to education. Particularly, students who are identified as ELLs can participate in language assistance programs to help ensure that they attain English proficiency and meet the academic content and achievement standards that all students are expected to meet. Even though the federal Office for Civil Rights (OCR) requires school districts to take affirmative steps to improve the school success of English language learners, previous studies indicated that English language learners have lower academic achievement in college entrance exams compared to general education students (Soland, 2019). Therefore, counselors and key stakeholders are encouraged to give extra attention to the needs of special education and ESL students (Yavuz, 2014).

In addition, as recommended by the six state-level studies, professional school counselors are encouraged to use comprehensive data, prioritize counseling activities, and focus on implementing a differentiated school counseling program delivery that meets the needs of all students, including special education and ESL students. Particularly, both ESL students and special education students with learning disabilities need systemic and ongoing supportive services. Therefore, comprehensive school counseling frameworks provide counselors with a road map so

they can develop targeted responsive services, and guidance curricula to meet the diverse needs of underserve students (Carey & Dimmitt, 2012).

### **Advocacy for Students of Color, Low Income and First-Generation College-Bound Students**

The disparities in achievement between students from the highest and lowest socioeconomic status groups are strikingly persistent throughout the past decades (Hanushek, Peterson, Talpey, and Woessmann, 2019). Students from low-income families are less likely to attend and graduate from college. In other words, income differences among families tend to have a significant impact on the college enrollment rates and success of students (Bailey, 2001). Growing numbers of low-income, urban students in the United States are exhibiting a lack of college and career readiness (ASCA, 2012). Avery (2010) studied the effects of counseling on low-income students. Students offered systemic counseling were 7.9 percentage points more likely than students not offered counseling to enroll in most competitive colleges. Avery (2010) also suggests that counseling would have had approximately twice as much effect if all students matched with counselors had followed the advice of the counselors.

Like, bilingual, low-income, and first-generation students, students of color make up a significant portion of underprepared students in college. In the early 1950's, racial segregation in both K-12 schools and post-secondary institutions was the norm across America. However, in 1954, thanks to the *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* court decision, African American students gained the opportunity and right to attend predominantly white K-12 schools and colleges (Kluger, 1975). Then, the Civil Rights movement also encouraged colleges to actively recruit African Americans and other underserved students. As a result of these social justice movements, the racial diversity of the student population in colleges has significantly increased (Yavuz, 2014).

Yet, even though there has been an increase in the number of Hispanic and Black students who are accepted into college, the gap in college attainment with White, non-Hispanic student remains large. For example, the 6-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time undergraduate students who began their pursuit of a bachelor's degree at a 4-year degree-granting institution was highest for Asian students (74 percent), followed by White students (64 percent), Hispanic students (54 percent), and Black students (40 percent) (NCES, 2019).

When all things are taken into the consideration, the limited college access and success of (1) Special Education Students, (2) English Language Learners, (3) Students of color, low-income and first-generation college-bound students are national concerns that are considered a social justice issue. It appears that there are significant, and in some cases, widening, gaps among certain groups of these students in terms of college access and student success. Since these disadvantaged minority students are underrepresented in the USA higher educational institutions, they are widely acknowledged by previous studies (Mishra, 2020). Overall, it is noted that these students do not have equal access and opportunities to enter and achieve in college.

### **Method**

The aim of the study was to observe how urban high school students' self-perceived knowledge and needs related to their academic, social, emotional, and career development. A quantitative

explorative study was conducted during Spring 2020 and focused on gathering and analyzing students' perception of their counseling needs regarding academic development, social and emotional development as well as college and career readiness.

The researcher focused on gaining an understanding of the urgent needs of urban high school students to inform school counseling services. The study design allows urban school principals and school counselors to identify the high and low program needs of urban students to improve their academic, social, emotional, and career development. Particularly, school leaders and counselors can apply the results to consider time allocation in prevention/education versus reactive/responsive academic and counseling services. During planning, local context should be taken into the consideration.

Research Question 1: What are the highest and lowest college and career readiness needs as perceived by urban high school students?

Research Question 2: What are the highest and lowest social and emotional readiness needs as perceived by urban high school students?

Research Question 3: What are the highest and lowest social and academic development needs as perceived by urban high school students?

Research Question 4: How urban high school students' perceptions of their high priority counseling needs are associated with special education, English language learner, parent education, and race?

## **Instrumentation**

This quantitative case study contains data derived from the comprehensive student need assessment survey. Fifty-five items in the survey were derived from the literature and the matrix comprehensive student need assessment survey was composed of questions in 3 domains: (1) academic development needs, (2) social and emotional development needs, and 3) college readiness and career development needs. Urban high school students were instructed to rate responses to questions related to each domain. Participants determined the level of need for each school counseling service by indicating "4"- Strongly Agree, "3"- Agree, "2"- Disagree, "1"- Strongly Disagree.

The comprehensive student needs assessment survey was reviewed by an expert panel consisting of certified school counselors and certified school administrators, and university professors. The first domain of the Needs Assessment Survey was comprised of 17 questions regarding the college and career readiness of urban high school students. The author conducted a reliability analysis to determine the internal consistency of the items. All seventeen items were included (N = 105) in the analysis. The results of the analysis indicated a Cronbach's alpha of .97, which was well above the conventionally acceptable Cronbach's alpha of .70 for social science research (Cohen, 1998).

The second domain of the need assessment survey was comprised of 24 questions regarding the social and emotional development of urban high school students. Social-emotional development contributes to academic and career success by helping students understand and respect themselves and others, acquire effective interpersonal skills, understand safety and survival skills, and develop into contributing members of society. These items had the

respondents reflect on the social and emotional development needs of their students. The results of the internal consistency analysis indicated a Cronbach's alpha of .96.

The third domain of the needs assessment survey was comprised of 14 questions regarding the academic development of urban high school students. Academic Development goals provide the foundation for the acquisition of skills, habits of mind, and knowledge that contribute to effective learning in school; employing strategies to achieve success in school; and understanding the relationship of academics to the world of work, and to life at home and in the community (CCSCF, 2021). These items had the respondents reflect on the academic development and school success needs of their students. The results of the internal consistency analysis indicated a Cronbach's alpha of .91.

### **Survey Participants**

To better understand urban high school students' perceptions of academic, social, emotional, college, and career readiness-related needs, this research was undertaken in one urban school in the state of Connecticut. A comprehensive need assessment survey was conducted using an electronic survey instrument and was administered to all high school students at one Connecticut urban high school. The student population at this urban high school is diverse. The racial makeup is White (46.2%), Hispanic (29.3%), African American (18.5%). Of the 314 high school students enrolled at the school, 213 responded to the survey, for a 78% response rate. Survey participants included in the analysis for this paper includes 14.4% English second language learner. It is also noted that 18.1 percent of participating students were enrolled in the special education program. Participants were also distributed across the high school students grade level 12 (18.6%) grade 11 (29.9%), grade 10 (22.1%) and, grade level 9 (29.4%). Age and college readiness differences between the grade levels can be considered as a limitation of the study.

### **Data Analysis**

In this quantitative explorative study, the researcher applied descriptive and inferential statistics to analyze responses to the quantitative research questions. Particularly, the mean and standard deviations of all items were computed to answer the first three research questions that focused on exploring the highest and lowest academic, social, emotional college and career readiness needs as perceived by urban high school students.

Different from the first three research questions, the fourth research question focused on exploring how urban high school students' perceptions of their high-priority counseling needs change based on special education, English language learner, parent education, race. The Chi-Square Test of Independence was used to answer the fourth research question. The Chi-Square Test of Independence determines whether there is an association between categorical variables (i.e., whether the variables are independent or related). It is a nonparametric test.

### **Findings**

This study was conducted in one Connecticut urban high school to explore high school students' perceptions of academic, social, emotional, and career development needs. It is expected that

the results provide school leaders and counselors with a framework and process to design and deliver comprehensive school counseling programs. Particularly, the findings were organized based on four main research questions.

**Research Question 1: What are the highest and lowest college and career readiness needs as perceived by urban high school students?**

To explore what urban high school students perceive as the highest and lowest college and career readiness needs, the researchers asked participants to rate the level of agreement for each statement from 1 (lowest priority need) through 3 (highest priority). As shown in Table 1, the total mean scores of urban high school students’ perception of their college and career readiness needs are ranked from highest priority to lowest priority. Results indicated that all mean scores higher than 2.15 out of 3 were considered between high and medium priorities.

Specifically, responses to the college and career readiness statements indicated the top four highest level of agreements are directly related with financial aid, job search and job application process including: (1<sup>st</sup>) Searching and applying for a job ( $M = 2.35, SD = 0.73$ ), (2<sup>nd</sup>) Identifying what education, training, and skills are required for different jobs ( $M = 2.34, SD = 0.74$ ), (3<sup>rd</sup>) Exploring grant, financial aid opportunities and loans ( $M = 2.30, SD = 0.74$ ), (4<sup>th</sup>) Understanding personal finance and creating simple personal budget ( $M = 2.30, SD = 0.75$ ). There is no statement that was rated as lower than 2.00 out of 3. The findings indicate that all college and career readiness related counseling needs are listed as high or medium priorities by urban high school students.

**Table 1**

*Urban High School Students’ Perception of Their College and Career Readiness Needs (N=213)*

Counseling needs related to college and career readiness	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Searching and applying for a job (cover letter, resume writing, interviewing)	2.35	0.73
2. Identifying what education, training, and skills are required for different jobs	2.34	0.74
3. Exploring grants, financial aid opportunities and loans	2.30	0.74
4. Understanding personal finance and creating a simple personal budget	2.30	0.75
5. Researching post-secondary requirements in relation to future career goals	2.30	0.70
6. College enrolment and transition	2.29	0.75
7. Attending college/career fairs to explore postsecondary options and requirements	2.29	0.75
8. Identifying personalities, values, and interests to plan college/career paths	2.28	0.72
9. Identifying career clusters to pursue as part of the college and career plan	2.27	0.70
10. Gaining early career experiences: career fairs, job shadowing, and internships	2.27	0.75
11. Understanding and using the accessible college and career readiness resources	2.26	0.74
12. Completing college application and college admission process	2.25	0.77
13. Researching post-secondary and employment options based on the career choice	2.25	0.73
14. Having easy access to a counselor to get help with college/career readiness	2.25	0.76

15. Understanding post-secondary options: college, career, technical, military	2.23	0.75
16. Applying knowledge of technology and social media to organize career goals	2.17	0.73
17. Demonstrating effective 21st Century Skills (4Cs) for future career success	2.15	0.75

**Research Question 2: What are the highest and lowest social and emotional readiness needs as perceived by urban high school students?**

Urban high school students’ counseling needs related to their social and emotional readiness have 24 items. To explore what urban high school students perceive as the highest and lowest counseling needs in this crucial domain, the researcher asked participants to rate the level of agreement for each statement from 1 (lowest priority need) through 3 (highest priority). As shown in Table 2, the total mean scores of urban high school students’ perception of their social and emotional needs are ranked from highest priority to lowest priority. Similar to the college and career readiness needs, the need assessment results indicated that all mean scores higher than 1.71 out of 3 were considered between high and medium priorities.

Specifically, urban high school students’ responses to the social and emotional statements indicated the top four highest level of the agreement are directly relate to social-emotional learning (SEL) and 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills including: (1) Understanding the balance between school, work, and leisure ( $M = 2.31, SD = 0.71$ ), (2) Understanding and accepting my personal strengths and weaknesses ( $M = 2.25, SD = 0.75$ ), (3) Improving self-confidence and self-esteem to achieve goals ( $M = 2.24, SD = 0.76$ ), (4) Improving communication and relationship skills ( $M = 2.23, SD = 0.76$ ). There is no statement that was rated as lower than 1.71 out of 3. The findings indicate that all social and emotional related counseling needs are listed as high or medium priorities.

Findings also indicated that urban high school students’ the lowest social and emotional development needs are related with relationship, self-awareness, personal safety, and security needs that include (1) Dealing with dating and relationship issues ( $M = 1.90, SD = 0.79$ ), (2) Dealing with self-harm and suicidal thoughts ( $M = 1.80, SD = 0.81$ ), (3) Dealing with my gender identity and sexual orientation ( $M = 1.77, SD = 0.86$ ), (24<sup>th</sup>) Dealing with alcohol and drug addiction problems ( $M = 1.71, SD = 0.83$ ).

**Table 2**

*Urban High School Students’ Perception of Their Social and Emotional Needs (N=213)*

Counseling needs related to social and emotional readiness	M	SD
1. Understanding the balance between school, work, and leisure	2.31	0.71
2. Understanding and accepting personal strengths and weaknesses	2.25	0.75
3. Improving self-confidence and self-esteem to achieve goals	2.24	0.76
4. Improving communication and relationship skills	2.23	0.76
5. Accepting individual differences in ethnicity, culture, race, religion.	2.23	0.83
6. Understanding practicing self-care and personal well-being	2.21	0.78
7. Getting along better with my friends, family members, teachers, and others	2.18	0.77
8. Improving my leadership and self-advocacy skills	2.18	0.76
9. Recognizing that everyone has rights and responsibilities	2.18	0.80
10. Recognizing, expressing, and managing my emotions	2.16	0.77

11. Dealing with my own personal issues and health problems	2.15	0.79
12. Feeling safe at school	2.12	0.80
13. Participating in enrichment and extracurricular activities (art, clubs, sports)	2.11	0.78
14. Developing effective coping skills when dealing with difficult decisions	2.11	0.78
15. Understanding and practice of personal safety skills	2.11	0.81
16. Demonstrating an understanding of the risks and responsible use of technology	2.06	0.79
17. Learning about community service and volunteer projects	2.06	0.78
18. Having easy access to counselor to get help with social & emotional concerns	2.02	0.81
19. Dealing with peer pressure, harassment, and bullying	1.92	0.81
20. Dealing with my home, family, divorce, and parent separation issues	1.91	0.82
21. Dealing with dating and relationship issues	1.90	0.79
22. Dealing with self-harm and suicidal thoughts	1.80	0.81
23. Dealing with my gender identity and sexual orientation	1.77	0.86
24. Dealing with alcohol and drug addiction problems	1.71	0.83

**Research Question 3: What are the highest and lowest social and academic development needs as perceived by urban high school students?**

The ASCA National Model (2019) encourages both school leaders and counselors to intentionally implement strategies that support and improve student academic achievement (ASCA, 2019, Parzych, Generali and Yavuz, 2021). Therefore, this study also explored the highest and lowest academic development needs as perceived by urban high school students. With an emphasis on improving the academic development of urban high school students, the findings are expected to inform urban school leaders and counselors how they can support students' academic development for a school success. 14 items have been identified related to the urban students' academic development counseling needs.

Urban high school students; responses to the academic development statements indicated the top four highest level of agreements are directly related to motivation, study and organizational skills including: (1<sup>st</sup>) Improving my self-motivation toward learning and schoolwork ( $M = 2.40, SD = 0.68$ ), (2<sup>nd</sup>) Improving my academic weaknesses ( $M = 2.36, SD = 0.67$ ), (3<sup>rd</sup>) Improving my effective study and organizational skills ( $M = 2.36, SD = 0.66$ ), (4<sup>th</sup>) Improving my test-taking skills ( $M = 2.34, SD = 0.70$ ). There is no statement that was rated as lower than 2.11 out of 3. Like the first two domains, the findings indicate that all social and emotional related counseling needs are listed as high or medium priorities. The general findings indicate that compared to social, emotional ( $M = 2.29, SD = 0.78$ ) and career development ( $M = 2.26, SD = 0.73$ ) domains, academic development domain has the highest overall mean score with ( $M = 2.29, SD = 0.71$ ).

**Table 3**

*Urban High School Students' Perception of Their Academic Development Needs (N=213)*

Counseling needs related to academic development	M	SD
1. Improving my self-motivation toward learning and schoolwork	2.40	0.68
2. Improving my academic weaknesses	2.36	0.67

3. Improving my effective study and organizational skills	2.36	0.66
4. Improving my test-taking skills	2.34	0.70
5. Understanding the graduation requirements	2.34	0.75
6. Understanding what test scores mean in relation to academic/career planning	2.33	0.73
7. Tracking my academic progress toward graduation and college readiness)	2.32	0.71
8. Managing my time effectively	2.32	0.69
9. Understanding the requirements of college entrance exams (PSAT/SAT, ACT)	2.28	0.72
10. Exploring my academic strengths and weaknesses	2.28	0.68
11. Having easy access to counselor to get help with my academic concerns)	2.22	0.74
12. Setting academic goals based on my evaluation of current school performances	2.20	0.68
13. Using computers, social media,/technology effectively to improve my learning	2.16	0.79
14. Reducing my test anxiety	2.11	0.81

**Research Question 4: How urban high school students' perceptions of their high priority counseling needs change based on the special education, ELL, parent education, race?**

The last research question explored how special education, bilingual, parent education, and race are associated with urban students' perceptions of their high-priority counseling needs. Therefore, cross-tabulations were constructed to compare perceptions by scores, separated based on these four factors. When the Chi-square test of independence was applied to determine the significance of any relationship between the selected independent factors and responses to the survey items, in general, there was not a significant association between high priority counseling needs and independent factors (1) special education, (2) bilingual, (3) parent education, and (4) race. In other words, since the p-value is greater than our chosen significance level ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ), the null hypothesis was not rejected. Rather, in many cases, we conclude that there is not enough evidence to suggest an association between high-priority counseling needs and selected independent factors. Particularly findings indicated that there is not an association between high priority counseling needs and whether or not a student is a first-generation college-bound student.

However, when the Chi-square test of independence was applied to determine significance of any relationship between race and responses to the survey items, results related to high priority social and emotional needs were significant including: Life Balance ( $\chi^2 (2, n = 207) = 8.83, p = .01$ ), Personal Strengths ( $\chi^2 (2, n = 207) = 5.91, p = .02$ ), Communication ( $\chi^2 (2, n = 207) = 6.86, p = .03$ ), Diversity Issues ( $\chi^2 (2, n = 207) = 15.73, p = .001$ ). Since the p-value is less than our chosen significance level  $\alpha = 0.05$ , we can reject the null hypothesis, and conclude that there is an association between high priority social emotional needs and whether or not students are White.

A similar significance pattern was observed when the Chi-square test of independence was applied to determine significance of any relationship between ELL students and responses to the survey items, results related to high priority college and career readiness needs were significant including: Job Requirements ( $\chi^2 (2, n = 209) = 5.89, p = .05$ ), Financial Aids ( $\chi^2 (2, n =$

209) = 7.38,  $p = .02$ ), Personal Finance ( $\chi^2$  (2,  $n = 209$ ) = 13.73,  $p = .01$ ), Post-secondary Plan ( $\chi^2$  (2,  $n = 209$ ) = 6.25,  $p = .04$ ). Since the  $p$ -value is less than our chosen significance level  $\alpha = 0.05$ , we can reject the null hypothesis, and conclude that there is an association between high priority college and career readiness needs and whether or not urban high school students are in a bilingual program.

Based on the Chi-square test of independence test results, we can also conclude that there is an association between urban students' high priority financial aids needs  $\chi^2$  (2,  $n = 209$ ) = 7.94,  $p = .01$ ), whether or not students are in a special education program. It is also noted that bilingual students are significantly more likely to agree with receiving counseling services regarding study skills  $\chi^2$  (2,  $n = 209$ ) = 6.51,  $p = .04$ ). In other words, there is an association between high-priority study skill needs and whether or not urban high school students are in a bilingual program.

**Table 5**  
*Urban High School Students' Very High Priority Counseling Needs by Student Factors*

Top Priorities	Special Ed.			Bilingual			First Generation			Student of Color		
	<i>M<sub>no</sub></i>	<i>M<sub>yes</sub></i>	<i>p</i>	<i>M<sub>no</sub></i>	<i>M<sub>ye</sub></i>	<i>P</i>	<i>M<sub>no</sub></i>	<i>M<sub>ye</sub></i>	<i>P</i>	<i>M<sub>no</sub></i>	<i>M<sub>ye</sub></i>	<i>p</i>
<b>College Career</b>												
				<i>s</i>			<i>s</i>			<i>s</i>		
Job Search	2.3	2.21	.09	2.4	2.0	.63	2.32	2.4	.83	2.32	2.3	.02*
Job Requirements	8			0	7			0			8	
Financial Aids	2.3	2.32	.52	2.3	2.1	.05*	2.33	2.3	.87	2.31	2.3	.33
Personal Finance	5			9	0			7			6	
College Plan	2.3	2.13	.02*	2.3	1.9	.02*	2.30	2.3	.08	2.23	2.3	.30
	4			6	7			7			7	
Self-Motivation	2.3	2.18	.35	2.3	1.8	.01*	2.30	2.3	.26	2.28	2.3	.71
Improving GPA	3			7	7			2			0	
Study Skills	2.3	2.26	.08	2.3	2.2	.04*	2.28	2.3	.69	2.23	2.3	.20
Test-Taking	1			2	0			3			4	
Graduation Plan	<i>M<sub>no</sub></i>	<i>M<sub>yes</sub></i>	<i>p</i>	<i>M<sub>no</sub></i>	<i>M<sub>ye</sub></i>	<i>p</i>	<i>M<sub>no</sub></i>	<i>M<sub>ye</sub></i>	<i>p</i>	<i>M<sub>no</sub></i>	<i>M<sub>ye</sub></i>	<i>p</i>
				<i>s</i>			<i>s</i>			<i>s</i>		
<b>Academic</b>												
Self-Motivation	2.3	2.50	.16	2.4	2.2	.20	2.41	2.4	.70	2.34	2.4	.07
Improving GPA	8			4	3			2			6	
Study Skills	2.4	2.24	.51	2.3	2.3	.21	2.43	2.3	.45	2.33	2.4	.12
Test-Taking	1			3	6			0			1	
Graduation Plan	2.3	2.47	.20	2.1	2.4	.04*	2.35	2.3	.29	2.28	2.4	.63
	3			7	1			7			1	
Self-Motivation	2.3	2.34	.69	2.3	2.2	.34	2.37	2.3	.94	2.30	2.4	.13
Improving GPA	7			9	0			7			0	
Study Skills	2.3	2.42	.50	2.3	2.3	.29	2.32	2.4	.94	2.34	2.4	.39
Test-Taking	7			9	0			4			0	
Graduation Plan	<i>M<sub>no</sub></i>	<i>M<sub>yes</sub></i>	<i>p</i>	<i>M<sub>no</sub></i>	<i>M<sub>ye</sub></i>	<i>p</i>	<i>M<sub>no</sub></i>	<i>M<sub>ye</sub></i>	<i>p</i>	<i>M<sub>no</sub></i>	<i>M<sub>ye</sub></i>	<i>p</i>
				<i>s</i>			<i>s</i>			<i>s</i>		
<b>Social-Emotional</b>												

	2.3	2.29	.33	2.3	2.2	.45	2.31	2.3	.74	2.22	2.4	.01*
Life Balance	3			3	7			2			0	
	2.2	2.37	.18	2.2	2.2	.72	2.27	2.3	.91	2.18	2.3	.02*
Strengths	4			6	7			0			4	
	2.2	2.24	.40	2.2	2.2	.94	2.28	2.2	.96	2.27	2.2	.05
Self Confidence	7			7	3			3			7	
	2.2	2.32	.19	2.2	2.1	.67	2.24	2.2	.38	2.15	2.3	.03*
Communication	2			5	7			3			1	
	2.1	2.39	.33	2.2	2.3	.90	2.20	2.2	.29	2.13	2.3	.01*
Diversity Issues	9			1	7			7			1	

## Discussion

The results of this study provide information and research-supported strategies for school counselors, school leaders, policymakers and educators as they consider the key stakeholders to implement comprehensive school counseling services. The implications for practice are grouped into three major domains (1) Implications for improving college and career readiness, (2) Implications for improving social and emotional development and (3) Implications for improving academic success.

### Implications for Improving College and Career Readiness of Urban High School Students

The findings of the study indicated the top four highest level of agreements are directly related with financial aid, scholarship, job search, and job application process. Since financial readiness is an important part of college access and college success, professional school counselors and school building leaders are encouraged to collaborate to provide the following school counseling services (1) Supporting urban students' job search and job application, (2) Providing guidance lessons to help students explore grant, scholarship, financial aid and loan opportunities, (3) Conducting personalized counseling sessions can also help urban students' understanding personal finance and personal budget guidelines (Millett, Saunders, and Fishtein, 2018).

Similar to financial readiness, the findings suggest that it should be the responsibility of the education system to improve career and job readiness of urban high school students (Astuti, Purwanta, Risqiyah, Veronica, and Novita, 2020). Student perceptions of need assessments present a unique opportunity for educators, with training and support, to talk to students about their career and job readiness. Particularly, based on the findings, schools are encouraged to provide students with early career experiences such as career fairs, job shadowing, and internship activities. After students research post-secondary requirements in relation to future career goals, they can also be encouraged to identify what education, training, and skills are required for different jobs.

### Implications for Improving Social/Emotional Development of Urban High School Students

Educators have an important role in providing students with targeted academic and counseling services. Therefore, besides college readiness activities, schools are encouraged to address the social and emotional needs of urban high school students (Romasz, Kantor, and Elias, 2004). In this study, urban school students' responses to the social and emotional statements indicated the top four highest levels of agreement are directly related to social-emotional learning (SEL) and 21st Century skills. Therefore, it is recommended that intentional interventions be developed that incorporate time management, self-confidence, self-awareness, communication, and relationship skills to enhance urban students' social and emotional development.

Particularly, while implementing social and emotional counseling activities, it is crucial to consider social justice and equity issues. Barnes (2019) provided a systematic review of the use of social-emotional learning (SEL) interventions in urban schools. She summarized the types of interventions used and the outcomes examined. The review of the 66 studies revealed that few incorporated culturally responsive strategies, and none addressed racism and the role it can play in student mental well-being (Barnes, 2019). Therefore, in the light of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) policies, school-based SEL interventions should be designed by considering classroom setup, diversity issues, and making learning contextual.

### **Implications for Improving Academic Development of Urban High School Students**

Urban high school students' responses to the academic development statements indicated the top four highest levels of agreement are directly related to motivation, study, and organizational skills. Therefore, practices and policies must be developed to ensure all students are provided the information and resources necessary for their academic success (Lane, Menzies, Ennis, and Oakes, 2018). For instance, besides improving urban students' self-motivation toward learning and schoolwork, student services might consider improving students' effective study and organizational skills as well as their test-taking skills. Since there is an association between high priority student needs and whether or not students are coming from a minority background. It is also suggested that need assessment surveys may be useful in identifying services that students are likely and unlikely to use and that multiple sources of information should be used in assessing diverse students' needs.

Moreover, effective implementation of school counseling depends on the partnership between school counselors and principals as well as the optimal student and counselor ratio (Parzych, Donohue, Gaesser, and Chieu, 2019). The American School Counselor Association (2012) recommends a ratio of 250 to 1. However, in urban schools, for one school counselor to provide ongoing individualized support to 250 low-income first-generation students and prepare them for college and career readiness does not seem to be a realistic and feasible practice. Therefore, in order to provide intensive individualized college and career counseling sessions, it is recommended that each urban school have one school counselor for every 160 students (Yavuz, 2014).

Finally, effective prevention and responsive interventions are important to address the underprivileged students' urgent needs related to their academic, social, emotional, college, and career development (Brown and Trusty (2005). To improve every underserved students' success all students should have equal access to resources, educators, certified school counselors, and specialists (Geesa, Elam, Mayes, McConnell, and McDonald, 2019). When school and district

leaders work in collaboration with school counselors, often school climate is more positive for students, faculty, and stakeholders. These findings might help **principals** and school counselors adhere to and implement comprehensive school counseling practices which include foundation, management, accountability, and delivery components.

### **The Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

There were several limitations to the study. The study is restricted to a defined geographic area that limits transferability. Nonetheless, the study can be considered "value-added" within the confines of the survey area with social justice focus. Therefore, the study may have replicative applications in other regions. Further investigation by including more diverse schools from different states is recommended. The full survey includes 55 items that can be considered long for high school students. In future research, a comprehensive factor analysis might have helped reduce the number of items. In this study, urban high school students' very high priority counseling needs were analyzed by various student factors including (1) Special Education, (2) Bilingualism, (3) First Generation, (4) Student of Color. However, students' grade level differences have been excluded. In this study, approximately 50% of the respondents to the survey were juniors or seniors. 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students likely have the most insight about career readiness, SEL, and academic preparation for college, while 29% of students responding were 9th grade. In the future research, further investigation of counseling needs of various grade levels is also recommended.

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# Playing Charades: Failures, Fads, and Follies of School Improvement Plans

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Most public K-12 schools in the United States enact a school improvement plan each year based upon the state testing results from the previous year. Despite the many frameworks, research, and recommendations, few scholars tackled what the plans contain and the results. Using a sequential explanatory mixed methods model, two stages examined school improvement plans for language arts tests over three years: a general linear model for 1316 schools in two states and a longitudinal thematic analysis of plans within one district. Most plans produced minor improvements in test scores, and most schools developed generic, nondescript plans to improve teaching practices. The school improvement plans failed to create substantive, visible change in most schools. Instead of the usual recommendations, a simple view of improvement finds schools need to focus on three criteria at the local level: students, curriculum, and highly effective teachers. Each criterion has several subvariables, but school improvement plans should move beyond a focus on student failure and seek to improve all students.

*Keywords:* school improvement, strategic leadership, educational administration, thematic analysis, mixed methods

Each Spring, most public K-12 schools in the United States partake in a familiar dance: A principal, with an advanced degree and often decades of experience, convenes a small group of staff members termed stakeholders to develop a school improvement plan (SIP) for the following year. State test results dictate the initiatives, with thousands of books, consultants, and a large bureaucratic framework guiding the would-be leaders. The cycle repeats year after year. Billions of dollars, many surefire plans, and even more in work hours tackle a problem which persists despite the best-laid plans (Backstrom, 2019).

Fads and fancies pushed much of the school improvement process since the 1980s (Alvy, 2017; Crandall et al., 1986). Over \$7 billion dollars alone was spent on school improvement grants which produced little gains and even less direct connection with the boondoggle (American Enterprise Institute, 2017). Lofty goals and feel-good sentiments guided much of the advice and studies, but the gap was few empirical studies demonstrated the efficacy or sustained rigor of school improvement plans (Fernandez, 2011; Harris, 2001; Strunk et al., 2016). There remains a lack of agreement in what comprises an effective school improvement plan, with teacher agency—the boots on the ground—often missing from the discussion (Datnow, 2020; Thompson, 2018).

The literature review examined school improvement plans and three popular approaches. A sequential explanatory mixed methods investigation starts with quantitative analysis to examine the longitudinal results of school improvement plans over three years in two states. Then a longitudinal thematic analysis dissects the nature and focus of school improvement plans for one district over the same time period. A discussion and recommendations converge the results of the studies.

### **Literature Review**

There is a cottage industry in school improvement, with recommendations on every aspect of how to fix what ails schools, from frameworks to curriculum to leadership and practically everything in between (Duignan, 1986; Leithwood et al., 2020; Murphy, 2013; Sebring et al., 2006). For most schools, after the many processes and initiatives, repressive desublimation defined the process, with little changes and results bearing more resemblance to what existed before the regular order of school improvement plans (Coker, 2021a; Rowan, 2002). Three major issues permeated school improvement plans: turnaround initiatives, systems thinking, and research trends.

A more extreme form of school improvement plans focused on turnaround efforts (Carlson & Lavertu, 2018), or radical, holistic changes within a school. Even though there have been some successes, there has been a failure to translate in the face of immutable student characteristics, such as student mobility and absenteeism (Henry et al., 2020; Peck & Reitzug, 2014). Strong leadership, collaboration, and theories galore received glowing recommendations (Evans et al., 2012; Hargreaves, 1995; Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Ross & Gray, 2006), but alas, the initiatives failed to deliver the promises predicated on oversimplification and buzzwords. Leaders in educational administration programs make pronouncements of being data driven, transformational, and many other great sounding, theoretical-laden terms.

Though school improvement plans failed to produce the explicit promises and goals, apologists nevertheless persisted in celebrating the value (Strunk et al., 2016). Little was known

about efficacy (Hitt & Meyers, 2018; VanGronigen & Meyers, 2021), but one common factor was schools were in an endless cycle of improving and professionally developing the same problems and factors year after year. Like many educational practices and strategic leadership initiatives, such as mission statements (Coker, 2022a), practitioners take as a given from their educational professors one must do what one has always done with little evidence.

A central tenet in most school improvement plans was the concept of systems theory (Askill-Williams & Koh, 2020). Leaders claimed school strategic planning utilized systems thinking. Systems thinking purportedly influenced much of the conceptual basis for school improvement. Schools needed to define, understand, and change the different units and dimensions included in school improvement efforts, or so the conventional wisdom stated (Schneider et al., 2017). Though school improvement plans often lacked the sophistication found in the original conception of the theory of systems thinking (Kast & Rosenzweig, 1972; Morel & Ramanujam, 1999; Shaked & Schechter, 2020), leaders recognized the inherent complexity and nonlinear relationships needed mapped (Schneider & Somers, 2006).

The limitations of systems theory originated in the genesis: As stated by von Bertalanffy, systems were open, constantly in flux, and complex which required an organizational commitment to tackle problems (Adelman & Taylor, 2007; Heylighen & Joslyn, 1992; Hopkins & Higham, 2007). Like school improvement frameworks and buzzwords, systems theory lacked a unified definition and cogent research (Arnold & Wade, 2015; Harris et al., 2021) and often became obsequious to fads, sloganeering, and grandstanding. Calls for gaining and using insight from modelling (Arnold & Wade, 2017; Hung, 2008) gave little clear direction, with heuristics probably the true practice of systems thinking (Mintrop & Zumpe, 2019).

There were few large-scale studies in effectiveness of school improvement plans (Bohanon et al., 2021; Browne-Ferrigno et al., 2008; Good et al., 2005; Huber & Conway, 2015), but lack of success did not stop researchers and consultants continuing to believe schools improvement plans can still work if the recommendations were heeded. Much more common, in dissertations, peer review articles, and the popular literature were vignettes and single case studies (e.g., Hollingworth et al., 2018; McIntosh et al., 2021; Redding & Searby, 2020; Tran et al., 2018). There were research-based practices and programs, but the failure to translate led to schools in an endless spiral of school improvement plans.

The research in effectiveness and research-based initiatives provided an information overload, with the challenge of how to implement the different programs and ideas (Cohen-Vogel et al., 2016). Elgart (2017) recounted several key characteristics, such as focus and a sustainable culture, but what or how the characteristics looked remained mysterious. Calls for parental engagement, academic press, professional learning communities, and other quick wins (e.g., Bloom & Owens, 2013; Brown et al., 2017; Cannata et al., 2017; Meyers & Hitt, 2018; Padilla et al., 2020; Solone et al., 2020) sounded good and right when pronounced by experts. Alas, the widespread success failed to materialize (Purkey & Smith, 1983; Redding & Nguyen, 2020).

Universities teach what academics believe school leaders need to know (Tingle et al., 2019), but how the skills translated into practice, both from a content analysis and results over time, was lacking (Preston et al., 2017; Strunk et al., 2016). As stated by Quong and Walker (2010), school improvement required leaders to move beyond a vision and a mission and work toward a better, sustainable future. Quick adoption and abandonment of practices created an endless

cycle of fads and change fatigue with little value (Rohanna, 2017). School improvement should be defined by measures of student achievement.

### **Significance and Research Question**

Every educational administration program teaches school improvement, whether as a formal program or through instructional evaluation and planning. Longitudinal studies examining the effectiveness of school improvement plans are infrequent (Feldhoff et al., 2016). The results could be useful to educational professors, consultants, and practitioners. There is a gap in both how schools improve and what themes drive planning at the local level.

There were two research questions, which converged. For the quantitative component: Do schools improve from year to year? If so, what was the practical significance? For the qualitative component: What do schools do to improve student achievement in reading? Both questions shed light on the nature of improvement efforts from a macrolevel and explain what was done at the microlevel.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Two frameworks influenced the research design and discussion: adaptive leadership and balanced leadership. Adaptive leadership stated successful organizations have continual diagnoses, seeks multiple perspectives, honors the past, encourages experimentation, and tests ideas and hypotheses (Heifetz et al., 2009). Balanced leadership examined leadership as the continuum between technical and adaptive; adaptive leadership was necessary for messy, complex situations with ill-defined boundaries (Goodwin et al., 2015). Combined, both theories suggested school improvement oscillates between the complex and the complicated, and each situation possessed unique features which required translation of research and programs with a backwards looking perspective on root causes which informed future practices.

### **Methodology**

The research methodology was a sequential explanatory mixed methods investigation (Creswell, 2021). First, two longitudinal samples from Washington and Florida were drawn over four years. Secondly, a longitudinal qualitative analysis using thematic analysis of school improvement plans from a large school district in Florida was then conducted to explore and qualify the quantitative results over the same time. The longitudinal qualitative study revealed patterns which could explain the quantitative research; under each step, there is further explanation.

All records were archival and publicly available; since the research did not involve humans, there was no institutional board review approval needed. There were attempts to draw from more states, but there were problems. First, only states which used the same tests over the entire period were considered; there could be problems comparing different tests. Secondly, many states either did not have records available or in an inaccessible format. Thirdly, states had to have robust school improvement plan requirements. Several more states were examined, but they failed to meet the criteria. Still, both states are from different areas of the US and provide a large, rich data set which could be generalizable to the population.

## Study 1: Quantitative Findings

Using the Washington Department of Education and Florida Department of Education websites, a longitudinal study was conducted for elementary schools for three years from 2015-2018, with 2014-15 as the baseline. The records of 439 Washington elementary schools and 877 Florida elementary schools were collected for language arts scores for K-5 students for comparison to answer the question: Do schools improve from year to year? If so, what was the practical significance? All records were initially downloaded into Microsoft Excel; matching by county and district location, elementary schools with the same name were disaggregated and schools were assigned a code. Using IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, version 28 (IBM Corp., Armonk, N.Y., USA), descriptive and inferential statistics examined if schools improved from year to year.

Categories were devised to examine the data for a combined sample of 1316 schools. Initially, for the baseline 2014-2015 school year, language arts test scores averaged 52.6 (SD = 16.4) and ended for the 2017-2018 school year averaging 55.8 (SD = 16.4). Yearly scores were also reported as quintiles. Year over year gains were broken down by >-10%, >-10 to -5%, <-5% to 5%, >5%-10%, and >10%. The rationale was -5% to 5% was trivial and due to random error (e.g., 80 students tested would need 4 students to improve or 1 per grade level, while 10% might be by chance but has less likelihood, etc.). The plan included descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and a general linear model (GLM).

The general linear model examined school improvement results from 2015-2018. The covariate was the 2014-2015 baseline, centered. Examining Table 1 under the Greenhouse-Geisser correction, as sphericity was violated, suggested a statistically significant result. Sullivan and Feinn (2012) cautioned the need for context and to look beyond the *p* value. The partial eta square (0.008) suggested the growth was very minor; the large sample probably produced significant results, but the GLM did not answer the question of practical significance (Ranganathan et al., 2015). Further analysis provided context of what school improvement looked like.

**Table 1**

*Repeated Measures ANCOVA for 2015-2016, 2016-2017, & 2017-2018: Test of Within-Subject Effects*

Source		Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
StudentAch	Sphericity Assumed	3853.356	2	1926.678	37.924	<.001	.028
	Greenhouse-Geisser	3853.356	1.645	2342.652	37.924	<.001	.028
	Lower-bound	3853.356	1.000	3853.356	37.924	<.001	.028
	Sphericity Assumed	1076.226	2	538.113	10.592	<.001	.008
StudentAch *	Greenhouse-Geisser	1076.226	1.645	654.293	10.592	<.001	.008
Base1415Cent	Lower-bound	1076.226	1.000	1076.226	10.592	.001	.008

	Sphericity Assumed	133512.071	2628	50.804		
	Greenhouse-Geisser	133512.071	2161.358	61.772		
Error (StudentAch)	Lower-bound	133512.071	1314.000	101.607		

Note. StudentAch = Student Achievement on state language arts assessment from 2015-2016, 2017-2018, & 2018-2019. Base1415Cent = State language arts scores for 2014-2015 centered.

Three analyses suggested the growth was small, possibly by chance, and insignificant in practice. First, the average growth over three years was 1.03% (SD = 3.21) per year, meaning most schools saw a change of 3.11% (SD = 9.64) in total. In any year, only 8-11% saw improvement greater than 10%. Secondly, there was a yoyo effect, suggesting regression to the mean—growth was sporadic and regressive—with over 90% of schools staying between  $\pm 10\%$  from the baseline to the end (and less than 9% were  $>80\%$  on student achievement in any year, meaning most schools had 2 for every 3 students fail for who succeeded or worse). Thirdly, as shown in Table 2, correlation showed as schools experienced growth in one year, there was negative growth the following year, and the final year approximated the first year. Year-over-year growth was uncommon, as growth for the first two years negatively predicted growth in the final year. Approximately 2.8% of schools had large gains or losses ( $>25\%$ ) after three years. Even trimming 70 outliers using Cook’s distance, as suggested by Faraway (2016), produced an effect size which suggested minor improvement: Results, with the Greenhouse-Geisser correction, were  $F(1.530, 1905.877) = 5.977, p = .006, \eta^2 = 0.018$ .

**Table 2**

*Correlations of growth for 3-year period split by starting quintiles.*

Control Variables			Yr1Gains	Yr2Gains	Yr3Gains
1415Quint	Yr1Gains	Correlation	1.000	-.531	-.040
		Significance (2-tailed)	.	<.001	.148
		Df	0	1313	1313
	Yr2Gains	Correlation	-.531	1.000	-.203
		Significance (2-tailed)	<.001	.	<.001
		Df	1313	0	1313
	Yr3Gains	Correlation	-.040	-.203	1.000
		Significance (2-tailed)	.148	<.001	.
		Df	1313	1313	0

Note. a. Computed using alpha = .05 b. 1415Quint = 2014-2015 Results by Quintile. Yr1Gains, Yr2 Gains, Yr3Gains = Yearly gains from previous year broken down by  $<-10\%$ ,  $>-10\%-5\%$ ,  $>-5\%$  to  $5\%$ ,  $>5\%-10\%$ , &  $>10\%$ .

The practical significance was illusory for most schools and suggested regression to the mean. The year-to-year difference revealed small overall gains of just over 1% each year—equivalent for many schools of one student improving. To put the situation in perspective, 46% of schools saw losses in the second year (another 5.8% saw no gains). Only 39% saw an increase of 5% or greater after three years (e.g., schools with losses in 2016-2017 saw 66% have gains the following year, while schools with gains 5% or greater saw 61% have a decline). The yoyo effect defined the sample.

Even a 10% improvement for most schools meant out of 100 students, approximately 3 students per tested grade level improved from the previous year before the gains were erased in the following year; the 3% improvement, for many schools, meant three students out of 100 improved after three years and might literally hinge on the improvement of only three questions (one per student). Noise, not systematic improvement, defined much of what passed for gains. The overall stark lack of success defined most schools in a dismal picture as well as inconsistency in gains. Even gains in one year were temporal. School improvement plans existed in name only and failed to produce continuous, widespread gains. A central question should be: Why do most schools persist as if there were no school improvement plans?

## **Study 2: Thematic Analysis**

School improvement plans for 16 Florida schools were examined using longitudinal thematic analysis. Using one school district, school improvement plans for elementary schools (K-5) over three consecutive school years, 2015-2016, 2016-2017, and 2017-2018, were selected if the schools had reading goals and action plans for improvements. Schools with missing data or lack of reading goals were excluded. The *a priori* plan was to select at minimum 12 schools, as it was thought 12 schools would provide a representative sample to understand school improvement plans which could be generalized to the population.

The research question was broad: What do schools do to improve student achievement in reading? Following Coker's (2021b) and Fereday and Muir-Cochrane's (2006) recommendations, thematic analysis was conducted using Microsoft Excel and Word. After downloading the school improvement plans, the schools were given a pseudonym (letters A-P), and each year and process were numbered to root the data to be able to return to the original source. Demographic data were collected. To analyze reading goals, the coding schema included in vivo, descriptive, processes, categories, subelements, elements, dimensions, themes, and meta-themes. A meta-narrative transcribed the findings into a story. There were also memos and aha comments as necessary. Temporality and directionality were coded by frequency and who/where implementation of the processes. Dimensions and themes were structured using the ethnographic approach every answer has an embedded question. The embedded question was developed by reverse root cause analysis, or every action was in response to a hypothesized problem and diagnosis. Coding and thematic formation were formed inductively and deductively.

Because there were approximately 10,000 codes generated, reliability and validity were improved by extensive cataloging using number codes. Every code received a dummy code, which allowed for a frequentist approach to ensuring consistency horizontally and vertically of each code. The frequency of codes was run with JASP Team (2021). JASP (Version 0.16)[Computer software] and Microsoft Excel. Using this data, reconciliation of data was conducted to examine if similar codes were analyzed consistently since there were multiple levels of agreement needed for the holistic framework. Any problems led to codes being reworked.

## **Sample**

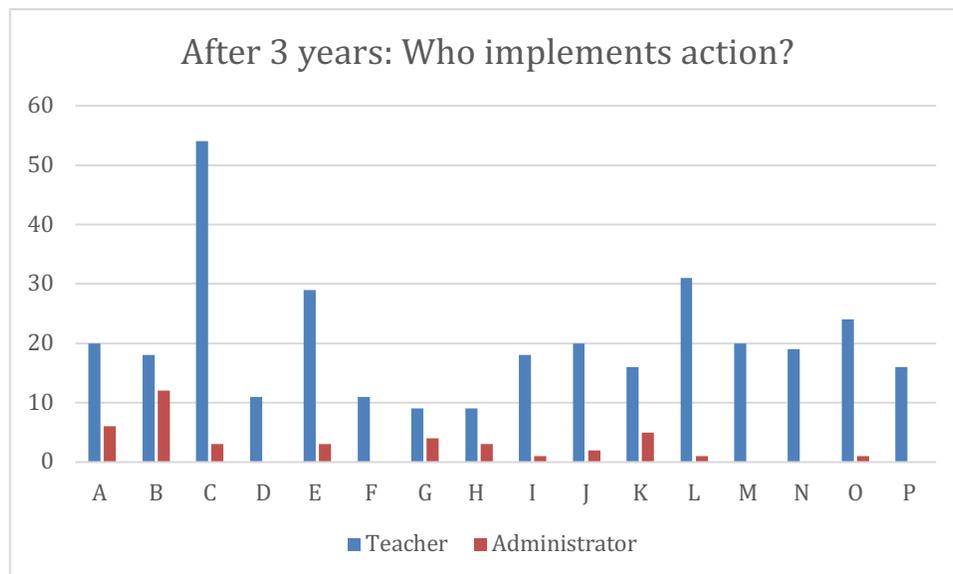
There were 16 elementary (K-5) schools from one large Florida school district comprising approximately 8,150 students (average school size 510, *SD* = 93.9). The schools were diverse,

with 26-100% of students minority and an average of 63.5% low socioeconomic status. A team developed most plans, with a range of 1-12 members ( $M = 8.1$ ;  $SD = 3.9$ ); the principal was on each team, and generally an assistant principal, teachers, and school psychologists/social workers rounded out the membership. The number of students retained was generally low (range of 0-13,  $M = 5.1$ ;  $SD = 3.8$ ). All schools had reading goals and action plans for the 2015-2016, 2016-2017, and 2017-2018 school years.

### Results

The 16 schools, over a 3-year period, planned 366 actions in total. Yearly actions per school ranged from 2 to 34 per year. At the end of the third year, schools averaged 22.6 actions (range 11-57;  $SD = 11.5$ ), of which 20.31, on average, fell to teachers and less than 3 to administrators. As shown in Figure 1, schools placed most of the burden on teachers, with a daily expectation of a change in instructional practices being the major driver. There was never any mention of abandonment, which leads one to conclude each action was in addition to the previous year's school improvement plan.

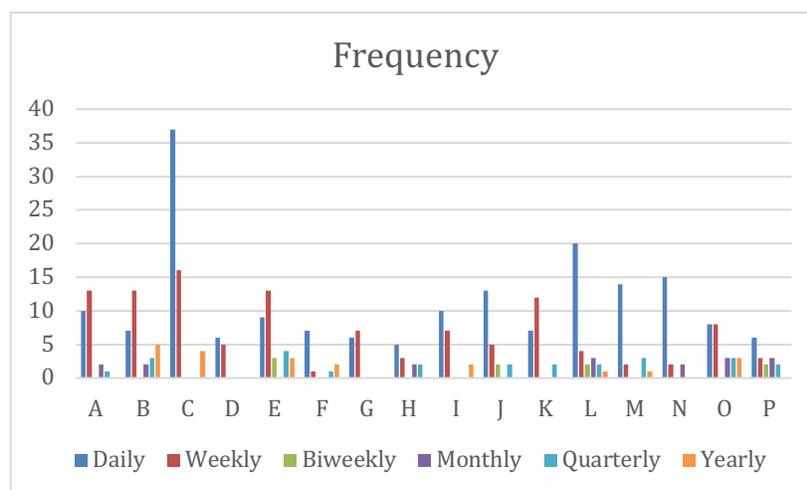
**Figure 1**  
*Implementation of Actions for Each School by Role*



Frequency of actions was broken down from daily to yearly, as shown in Figure 2. As an aggregate, schools put forth action plans which required teachers to implement different actions on a daily or weekly basis. Much less common were long-term goals, such as quarterly and yearly requirements. Broken down yearly, schools on average implemented 5 to 8 new teacher actions per year, every year. Administrators had much fewer expectations. There was no mention of

when or how actions were monitored except by observation of the administrators and, or coaches.

**Figure 2**  
*Frequency of Actions in SIPs by School After 3 Years*



Three themes defined the plans: T1) Schools cannot deliver the necessary curriculum due to the following: lack a coherent, standards-based curriculum, an optimal schedule, and sufficient staff (frequency = 20; 5.5%); T2) Behind the Scenes: Teachers need professional development and regular collaboration time to develop effective instructional techniques, intervention and differentiation, and processes for data-driven instruction. (frequency = 140; 38.3%); T3) Classroom Level: Teachers lack effective teaching strategies and interventions with proper supervision. (frequency = 202; 55.2%). As shown in the Appendices A-D, a complete catalog of categories (C1-99) with sub-elements (SE1-99), elements (E1-99), dimensions (D1-99), and themes (T1-3) connect every component of the analysis together.

Of the themes, T3 dominated action plans by a wide margin. The two dimensions directly related to instruction, D2 (staff lack effective, research-based strategies aligned to state standards to engage students; 145 count; 39.6% of all dimensions) and D3 (there is not enough staff or time, but staff members lack the skills to correctly intervene anyway; 19; 5.2%) dominated T3. The top suggestions for D2 were the following: guided reading, small groups, vocabulary instruction, and independent reading. For D3 within T3, feedback was the major goal to improve teacher performance; D4, lack of meaningful interventions, was closely behind. There were many other recommendations, from planned physical movement, culturally relevant instruction, and mini-lessons. T3 overwhelmingly expected teachers to directly change classroom practices on a regular basis, as poor instructional practices needed improved to raise student achievement.

The second theme sought to develop teachers through collaboration, professional development, and common assessments. The thought seemed to be teachers lacked the skills and knowledge with which to adequately perform instruction at a high level, even after receiving

a bachelor's degree at minimum and many having a master's degree. For T3, three dimensions stood out: professional development or PD (D5), professional learning communities or PLCs (D6), and data-driven instruction (D7). Professional development centered on using instructional coaches and standards, while PLCs had general advice on how to operate or focused on data-driven instruction.

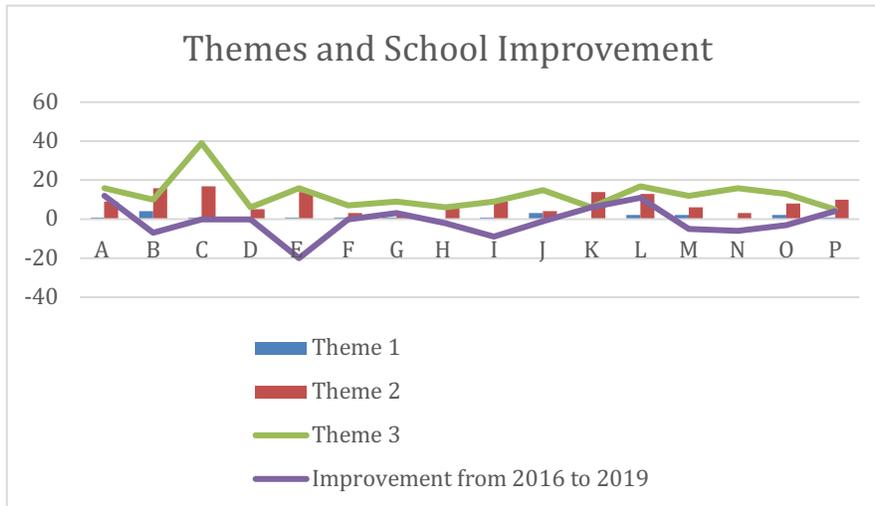
Schoolwide, T3, was infrequent and suggested supervision/lack of leadership and misaligned curriculum (D1) caused poor reading gains. The crossover of dimensions justify why themes were logically separated the way they were. All three themes discussed standards-based curriculum and instruction, but the focus was different for each theme. T1 looked at aligning the curriculum before the school year; T2 sought either PD or PLCs for teachers to work throughout the year aligning standards; T3 required teachers to align instructional content with the curriculum. All three had one dimension, but the implementation and responsibilities varied widely.

Another example of the splitting of dimensions by themes was data-driven instruction (D7, D3, and D6). At the school level, some schools used the previous year's standardized testing to plan groups and interventions before the school year started. Behind the scenes, PLCs and less frequently PD instructed teachers to come together to analyze data and implement plans accordingly. Still, other plans pushed data-driven instruction down to the classroom level and either wanted decisions in real time or teachers to develop formative assessments to respond flexibly.

By and large, schools showed either negative or little improvement, as shown in Figure 3. During the 3-year period, 11 schools had either negative or zero results, and three schools had results which could be counted as trivial. Results around 5% or less might have been noise; since the results do not measure the same cohorts, there could be the natural variance in small numbers, i.e., 5% is only 2-3 students per grade level for a building with two teachers per grade level, which could be the change with new students. Two schools had results >10% (A and L), but a comparison to elements, categories, dimensions, and themes did not give any direct effect. There must be a difference which the SIPs did not account. For the three years, the change was up and down for every school except three which showed consistent gains year in and year out, as shown in Appendix E. Figures 1 and 2 do not provide much insight beyond change by chance.

**Figure 3**

*School Improvement Results After 3 Years of SIPs Compared to Total Number of Each Theme.*



### ***Meta-themes***

There were three meta-themes which applied to the results and cut across every theme: activity over value, the re-creation and repackaging of the status quo, and the lack of data-driven decision making. School improvement plans had a common connotation and denotation, but the results after three years showed most schools did not improve, and of the schools which did, there was no clear connection to any action or goal. School improvement plans were a rite of passage, required each spring to build the illusion of improvement.

Activity over value detailed no risk in any action. Everything was a certainty, as there was no risk in any action. The activity was the objective, with no measurement or performance indicators of anything except implementing a policy or procedure in hopes of improving student learning. From guided reading to a standards-based curriculum to PLCs and PD, doing stuff was what defined all improvement efforts. Even before anything started, as long as the policy or program was implemented, success was guaranteed. SMART goals were not so smart after all.

There was little evidence any action was any more than a continuation of the status quo repackaged; student learning be damned, as the quality was destined to remain the same. Assuredly, every school used small groups, PLCs, PDs, coaches, and the many other actions before the current plans. There were no adaptations, experimentation, or innovation in all activities. Doing what one had always done with the protestations of a different result defined the norm rather than the exception; instead of a change at the most basic level, SIPs were largely surface level without any substantive improvements.

Many actions called for the use of data to guide and drive the curriculum, instruction, and interventions. Yet, there was not a connection of any action to a specific data point. The results revealed there were no diagnoses or actions rooted in the specifics. Every action was generic and lacked nuances which should define the plans. The achievement of individual students, classrooms, and teacher efficacy should provide a great deal of variation suggesting actions localized and differentiated by the units of analysis (e.g., if one teacher had significantly higher scores than another teacher, there should be an investigation to see what could be done both within and between classrooms, etc.). Nested variance could tell a more complete story, especially with small numbers.

Consilience—or the convergence of multiple perspectives and disciplines—was missing. There was neither systematic nor systemic considerations, as there were no questions or connections to proximal and distal causes. Schools wrote documents to appease a bureaucratic system by going through the motions to make lofty goals with a plethora of actions decidedly lacking in calls for improved student learning. SIPs lacked a conjunctural analysis of the components and drivers of the schools under study. The result was schools aligned perfectly with the unstated goal: no change, no improvement, carry on with the status quo.

A *single-state theory* connected all themes. All students—in all classes, all teachers, all grade levels, in all schools—lacked any divergence. What was needed for one was needed for all. To use a hospital analogy, every diagnosis was the same. There was a familiar narrative. Get 8-10 staff members together. The principal already possessed the necessary knowledge and skills, often imparted from the central office. Teachers needed to teach better. Administrators needed to keep on their employees. Sprinkle some buzzwords, and PLCs, collaboration, and data-driven would cure that which ails. Everything was a quick fix, and repeat the same dance year in and year out.

### ***Reliability and Validity***

Reliability and validity in research can be enhanced and established by producing a transparent record of the qualitative process (Carcary, 2009; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Rodgers & Cowles, 1993). There was a clear coding schema, with findings rooted and grounded in the data. By producing an extensive cataloging system, the data were verified and cross-checked both horizontally and vertically for logic and consistency (as shown in the appendices) throughout the process.

Becker and Geer (1957) pointed out long ago inferences were not what happened, and not only can there be mistakes and mistaken assumptions, the further one gets from the data, the less reliability and validity. Up to themes, the conclusions and categories were closely connected to the data. The meta-themes developed from an intimate knowledge of both academic ideas of strategic leadership and school improvement and a practitioner's experience with school improvement, both direct and vicariously. Still, by producing a thorough record, the reader can see how the conclusions were formed and find alternatives which could provide an explanation.

One way to enhance reliability and validity is to compare and contrast with previous findings. Meyers and VanGronigen (2020) found a similarity in root-cause analysis: Those darn teachers need to do a better job. Other researchers found calls for clarity, data-driven instruction, and improved instructional practices (Gonzales et al., 2020; Leithwood et al., 2019), but a contradiction existed in the present study. Beyond very general SMART goals, there was never any mention of actually being data-driven. Nowhere did anyone have specific processes and products to direct and align activities; there was homage to the different buzzwords, but the activity was the objective.

Raining a plethora of solutions for problems not defined and offering a blanket, one-size-fits-all approach dominated most school improvement plans (Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019; Scherer & Nilsen, 2019; Slavin, 2017). The plans, all from one large district, had significant overlap, where often the same goals appeared across multiple plans. Truly innovative or

individualized ideas were not to be found. There was an agonizing oversimplification, generally rooted in improved teachers and teacher behavior. Strikingly, what and how students would do something differently were missing.

## Discussion

Around this part of most research articles, recommendations permeate the discussion. New goals and objectives, replete with a well-developed, *novel* framework, litter tens of thousands of dissertations, articles, books, and consultants' documents. All the plans and frameworks offer promises of success and improvement; the stark reality is research is often overstated and practically everything studied claimed effectiveness (Coker, 2022b; Evans, 2022). Canned plans and trivial gains—often erased year to year—defined a lack of progress by a group of planners with a great deal of experience and advanced degrees looking either from the outside or at a distance (Alvy, 2017; Coe, 2009). Most school leaders believe they are Atlas when they are really Sisyphus. Expediency often defined what was done (Harris, 2000; Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019). Three main drivers offer improvement: jettisoning business as usual, developing an antiframework, and a simple view of improvement (SVI).

What if schools eliminated professional development? What if there were no school improvement plans? What if consultants, instructional coaches, and collaboration time were eliminated? What if programs, such as RtI, MTSS, and PBIS, were done away with? Why do leaders recycle fads and buzzwords endlessly? The reality was, for most teachers, few would see or do anything differently. Worse yet, for most students, there would be nothing visible as a drop in student achievement already existed (Camera, 2021). A magical realism defined plans, with a bluntness revealing the drivel: false sense of stakeholders, group work as a panacea, and defining student behavior downward. The paradox of calls for data-driven instruction existed, yet one saw no data in the plans or recognition that some classrooms were successful already and do not need an umbrella of reform. Doing and changing—not achieving—supplanted the goals of school improvement plans.

Plans were and are designed to focus on activities over achievement, taking a forced perspective of the clutter of disconnected ideas from a low angle. Focusing on several connected ideas, the background was blurred, and a high angle, forced perspective—the bird's eye view—was uncommon. Without a bird's eye view, plans were neither systematic nor long range. There was no measurement of any failure, and any leader could ask themselves: How did schools improve, and how does one know? The myths of school improvement drive the status quo, some of which are listed:

- Myth of professional development. Schools know what effective professional development entails, but few do the necessary work, monitor results/implementation, and often end with a net negative (Desimone et al., 2002; Garet et al., 2001; Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Heissel & Ladd, 2018; Kraft et al., 2018).
- Myth of data driven. The SIPs in this study, and one could generalize to most, called for data-driven instruction but lacked the data-driven aspect within their own plans. Using data proved unworkable and a waste for most teachers at the classroom level (Gleason et al., 2019; Hamilton et al., 2009; Neuman, 2016; Schildkamp, 2019).

- Myth of instructional coaches and leadership. Research suggested what was highly effective and ineffective in teaching and learning, and group work was not a factor in the effective part (Rosenshine, 2012; Stockard et al., 2018). Teacher leadership, instructional coaching, and instructional leadership have not produced widespread positive effects in student achievement (Hallinger et al., 2020; Ingersoll et al., 2018; Moody, 2019; Wong, 1997).

There are other myths. One push was to avoid nonexclusionary discipline and act like teachers could manage extreme behaviors while simultaneously teaching and maintaining the wellbeing of everyone in the classroom, but promoting incivility, disruptive behaviors, and violence erodes the already-mentioned slim chances of school improvement plans (Chambers Mack et al., 2019; MacNeil et al., 2009; Polanin et al., 2021; Shindler et al., 2016). All tie into the learning environment, but the calls for research-based practices struggle with competing demands.

The antiframework operates on three premises: teachers—not administrators, professors, or consultants—are responsible; highly personalized, highly contextualized improvements; and systematic not systemic drives change. Magical realism controls most school improvement plans: Get together, implement what the central office and principal want, influenced by college staff members and consultants who have no accountability, and after crossing one’s finger, repeat the following year while taking credit for any improvement (no matter how small and trivial) and erasing continued failure. Cookie-cutter approaches and *pro forma* actions must be jettisoned.

Teachers, as a group, lack meaningful chances to participate in school leadership, to receive promotions, and give way to a singular leader at the top (Chambers Mack et al., 2019; Timperley, 2005). Not surprisingly, lack of control was a factor in teachers leaving the profession (Madigan & Kim, 2021). Sham stakeholders act like teachers have a say, but the bureaucracy and trends drive much of what passes for teacher involvement. Administrators mistake placing responsibility as a singular factor and not a shared purpose (Connolly et al., 2019). The teachers are the most knowledgeable, experienced ones to know and understand the issues and needs facing students, the classroom, and the school. Furthermore, teachers will be the ones to implement any proposed changes.

A highly personalized, highly contextualized school improvement process was missing from the literature and the current studies. Dixon and Palmer (2020) pointed out improvement depends on failure and tackling the problem; nowhere did they or anyone else mention a blanketed, one-size-fits-all approach. Instead of promoting plans which label every student and classroom with the same ailments, schools must also improve students who already succeed as well as highly effective classrooms. Not only should school leaders recognize and reward successes—instead of a complete focus on failure—school improvement plans *must* adapt the radical idea of two strands: How to improve students and teachers who were failing (Benoliel & Berkovich, 2020) while also improving those who were succeeding. The lived experiences and marks of success within the schools should be part of the roadmap to whole school improvement.

Stoll (2009) called for a shift away from generic recommendations to capacity building. The antiframework includes a vision, mission, and goals (Meyer et al., 2020) as well as research of the extant literature (Wallace et al., 2001) and a rejection of the status quo (Betts, 1992), but the central axes transform the external frameworks and integrate them within the existing system. Systems thinking is futile and incomplete once analyzed, but systematic is the ability to pick out the criteria which matter. While many frameworks will be applicable, schools will have

local contexts and issues which both hinder what need done and externalize the problems at the detriment of student success.

The simple view of school improvement can be reduced to the following equation: *student learning x rigorous curriculum x effective teacher = school improvement*. There are many subvariables and factors, but schools need to stop acting like only teachers are the problem. Drift is a real concern; a central goal of all elementary schools is reading competency, yet SIPs get inundated with all kinds of *disponible-par hasard-objets trouves* (Dougherty & Weiner, 2019). Schools must define their domains of inquiry and work to change what they can, driven and monitored by the boots on the grounds doing the real work. A root cause analysis could also find examples of positive deviance, or classrooms and teachers with uncommon success which could serve as a model for the entire school. Abandonment of fads and programs would probably be at a 2:1 initiative; for each new program, two should be abandoned. In the antiframework, teachers would be the staff where decision making was pushed down to and the ones who could “pull the rope,” or stop and point out failures and problems in real time.

Making school improvement plans revolutionary would also be rooted in the past—both proximal and distal. Schools would have to change to accomplish the antiframework. Why and how students fail would need documented (Schmoker & Wilson, 1993). Test makers could follow cohorts, student level variables, and triangulate other tests to flesh out patterns. There should not be a year-long wait to see if any of the random forays into improvement made a marked difference, with the need for rapid, small changes (Breakspear & Jones, 2020; Rubenstein-Montano et al., 2001). Caputo and Rastelli (2014) presented a way forward: School improvement involves leaders—teachers and principals—as researchers. Self-construction, contextualization of knowledge, and testing for results (Peurach et al., 2016), along with an institution of clinical collaboration and professional development, could directly disrupt the business-as-usual approach (Gonzales et al., 2020).

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations. First, the quantitative data examined two states and three years. Though the sample was large, schools in different states with different tests might have competing findings. Other factors, such as school climate, demographics, and school size, could improve the generalizability of the findings. Secondly, the qualitative findings were from one district. Comparing plans between districts and for a longer time period would add to the understanding of the process. A more complex statistical analysis could give a model of important factors.

Future research needs to consider different ecological variables which impact student achievement (Feldhoff et al., 2022). The school’s demographic factors, curriculum, and staff characteristics could offer a holistic view of the context of school improvement plans. Goals and objectives in SIPs should be firmly tied to concrete metrics. Finally, highly successful turnaround schools and extreme failures of plans would give specifics in the hows and the whats.

### **Conclusion**

Educational professionals, from practitioners to professors, have a moral imperative to own their failures and recognize current business-as-usual approaches lack positive results (Fullan, 2018; Timperley & Robinson, 2001). Research on school improvement was often fragmented and contradictory (Dragoset et al., 2019; Feldhoff & Radisch, 2021; Sun et al., 2021), yet at the school level, there was consistency: the same results despite binder fillers—school improvement plans—which sat on a shelf and produced little value. Long-time 20<sup>th</sup> century school union leaders Bob Hurst and Bill Dobbles described the problem: A teacher was promoted to principal, and the administrators would take the new principal in the backroom and give them the secrets to success; instantly, they knew it all. Scholars and consultants mean well, but the late Robert Slavin (2017) pointed out the fallacies of such a disconnect. Complexity and ambiguity of systems defy fads and single-order change (von Bertalanffy, 1972).

Argyris (2000) claimed jargon, buzzwords, and dreamy visions, even when research backed, failed to translate. School improvement results at the individual level were black swans, predicated on overly simplistic solutions (Shaked & Schechter, 2020). Organizational dysfunction matters (Kiliçoğlu et al., 2019), and generic, external answers failed to address the idiosyncrasies of the local context of each school building. Schools must both go it alone and connect with others going through the same experience (Bryk, 2015); otherwise, schools would be apt to discontinue the current charade and save the time, money, and resources.

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## Appendix A

Sub-elements by category and correlated by elements-dimensions-themes.

*Note.* Percentages and counts are in parentheses. Dominant dimensions and themes listed.

<b>C1 Assessment (7.5%)</b>	<b>C5 Interventions (4.6%)</b>
SE1.1 Benchmark (5), E1-D3-T2	SE5.1 Extended Learning (8), E13-D4-T3
SE1.2 Formative (13), E1-D3-T2	SE5.99 Miscellaneous (11)
SE1.3 General (8) E1-D3-T2	<b>C6 Professional Development (8.2%)</b>
SE1.4 Progress Monitoring (4), E9-D3-T2	SE6.1 Coaches (12), E16-D5-T2
SE1.99 Universal (1), E1-D3-T2	SE6.2 General (3), E14-D5-T2
<b>C2 Curriculum (4.1%)</b>	SE6.3 Leadership (2), E99-D5-T2
SE2.1 Coaching (2), E16-D1-T1	SE6.4 Standards (4), E3-D5-T2
SE2.2 Essentials (3), E7-D1-T1	SE6.5 Strategies (7), E10-D5-T2
SE2.3 Standards Alignment (8), E3-D3-T1	SE6.99 Miscellaneous (5)
SE2.99 Miscellaneous (4)	<b>C7 Professional Learning Communities (10.4%)</b>
<b>C3 Data Analysis (7.7%)</b>	SE7.1 General (15), E14-D6-T2
SE3.1 Schoolwide (7), E5-D7-T2	SE7.2 Data Analysis (14), E5-D6-T2
SE3.2 Teacher (15), E5-D7-T2	SE7.3 Standards Alignment (5), E3-D6-T2
SE3.3 Teams/Collaboration (10), E5-D7-T2	SE7.31 Consistency (2), E99-D6-T2
<b>C4 Instruction (41.2%)</b>	SE7.32 Rigor (4), E3-D6-T2
SE4.1 General (12), E6-D2-T3	SE7.4 Norms (2), E14-D6-T2
SE4.11 Guided Reading (13), E10-D2-T3	SE7.99 Miscellaneous (1)
SE4.12 Independent Reading (8), E10-D2-T3	<b>C8 Supervision (3.4%)</b>
SE4.13 Journaling (4), E10-D2-T3	SE8.1 Observations (13), E15-D8-T3
SE4.14 Notetaking (4), E10-D2-T3	SE8.99 Miscellaneous (1)
SE4.15 Reading General (4), E10-D2-T3	<b>C99 Miscellaneous (1.5%)</b>
SE4.16 Rigorous (2), E10-D2-T3	SE99 Miscellaneous (7)
SE4.17 Small Groups (12), E2-D2-T3	
SE4.18 Student Centered (5), E10-D2-T3	
SE4.19 Vocabulary (10), E18-D2-T3	
SE4.20 Essential Questions (9), E7-D2-T3	
SE4.21 Writing (10), E19-D2-T3	
SE4.3 Feedback (12), E4-D3-T3	
SE4.4 Mini-Lessons (4), E12-D2-T3	
SE4.5 On-Task (3), E12-D2-T3	
SE4.6 Rigor (4), E3-D2-T3	
SE4.7 Rubrics/Scales (10), E8-D3-T3	
SE4.8 Standards Alignment (8), E3-D2-T3	
SE4.9 Gradual Release (4), E10-D2-T3	
SE4.91 Computers (2), E10-D2-T3	
SE4.92 Focus (2), E10-D2-T3	
SE4.93 Metacognition (2), E10-D2-T3	
SE4.94 Physical Movement (2), E10-D2-T3	
SE4.99 Miscellaneous (23)	

## Appendix B Elements

*Note.* Counts and percentages are in parentheses,

E1	Students not assessed and held accountable (27; 7.3%)
E2	Cooperative learning needed (12; 3.2%)
E3	Lack of standards alignment (36; 9.8%)
E4	Inadequate check for understanding/feedback poor or inappropriate (13; 3.6%)
E5	Lack of data-driven decisions (49; 13.4%)
E6	Lack of differentiation/RtI effectiveness (17; 4.6%)
E7	Lack of focused instruction/essential questions (12; 3.3%)
E8	Lack of meaningful grading (10; 2.7%)
E9	Lack of progress monitoring (4; 1.1%)
E10	Lack of research-based strategies (83; 22.7%)
E11	Lesson not paced/engaging (5; 1.4%)
E12	OT-Students are off task (3; 0.8%)
E13	Period of time too small (10; 2.7%)
E14	PLCs fail to function (19; 5.2%)
E15	Staff do not follow through/inability to produce without supervision (13; 3.6%)
E16	Staff need coaching to improve (16; 4.4%)
E17	Teachers lack adequate knowledge (3; 0.8%)
E18	Inadequate vocabulary instruction (10; 2.7%)
E19	Students do not write enough (10; 2.7%)
E99	Miscellaneous (14; 3.8%)

## Appendix C Dimensions

*Note.* Counts and percentages in parentheses.

D1	Curriculum not aligned not proper scope and sequence. (17; 4.6%)
D2	Instruction 1: Staff lack effective, research-based strategies aligned to state standards to engage students. (145; 39.6%)
D3	Instruction 2: Staff members lack effective feedback, assessments procedures, and progress monitoring (53; 14.5%)
D4	Interventions: There is not enough staff or time, but staff members lack the skills to correctly intervene anyway. (19; 5.2%)
D5	PD: With coaches, to build missing necessary skills because staff struggle collaborating. (34; 9.3%)
D6	PLCs: Schools either lack PLCs or ones which function to drive instruction by data and an essential, standards-aligned curriculum. (43; 11.7%)
D7	Staff members do not collect data regularly, and when they do, they lack using the data on in classroom instruction, interventions, and whole school planning. (32; 8.7%)
D8	Supervision: A lack of leadership and poor teacher skills need remedied to improve instruction. (14; 3.8%)
D99	Miscellaneous (9; 2.5%)

## Appendix D

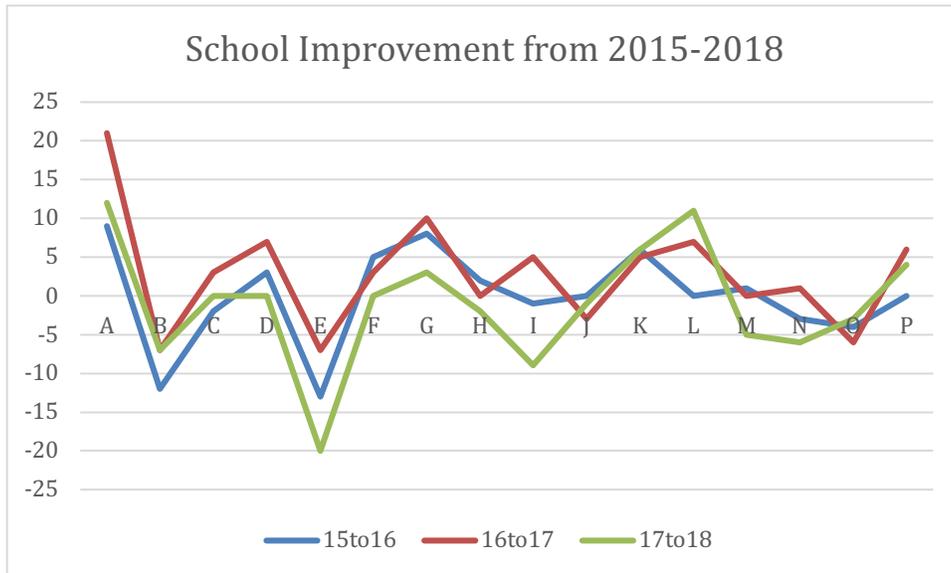
Themes broken down by dimensions, elements, categories, who implements, and frequency

*Note.* Counts and percentages are in parentheses.

T1	<p>School Level: School cannot deliver the necessary curriculum: lack a coherent, standards-based curriculum, an optimal schedule, and sufficient staff. (20; 5.5%)</p> <p>Major Dimensions: D1 (17), D99 (3) Major Elements: E3, E7, E6. Major Category: C6</p> <p>Who implements? Teachers (15), Administrators (5)</p> <p>Frequency: Daily: 3, Weekly: 4, Bi-Weekly: 4, Monthly: 0, Quarterly: 3, Yearly: 6</p>
T2	<p>Behind the Scenes: Teachers need professional development and regular collaboration time to develop effective instructional techniques, intervention/differentiation, and processes for data-driven instruction. (140; 38.3%)</p> <p>Major Dimensions: D3 (31), D5 (34), D6 (43), D7 (32). Major elements: E5, E1, E3, E4, E16. Categories: C1, C3, C6, C7.</p> <p>Who implements? Teachers (123), Administrators (17)</p> <p>Frequency: Daily: 36; Weekly: 53; Bi-Weekly: 5; Monthly: 17; Quarterly: 17; Yearly: 12.</p>
T3	<p>Classroom Level: Teachers lack effective teaching strategies and interventions with proper supervision. (202; 55.2%)</p> <p>Major Dimensions: D2 (145), D3 (22), D4 (19), D8 (14), D99 (2). Major Elements: E10, E2-4, E6, E9, E15, E18, E19. Categories: C4, C5, C8.</p> <p>Who implements? Teachers (186), Administrators (16)</p> <p>Frequency: Daily: 141; Weekly: 56; Bi-Weekly: 0; Monthly: 0; Quarterly: 1; Yearly: 4.</p>

### Appendix E

#### Trends in student achievement from 2015-2018 by school



# Nebraska's Superintendency Pay Transparency Act: Considerations for Rural Midwest Policymakers

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*Salary differences between male and female superintendents start at the beginning of their careers and continue throughout employment (Biasi & Sarsons, 2022; Blau & Kahn, 2017). This practice draws attention to the lack of gender equity, as evidenced by the unequal distribution of power, wealth, and benefits between males and females employed in this profession (Parmer, 2021). Salary negotiations provide an opportunity to improve resources, tasks, and monetary compensation (Säve-Söderbergh, 2019). While men readily self-promote and negotiate, women are less likely to engage in these practices (Northouse, 2019). Literature suggests five topics attributable to women's performance during negotiations: gender differences, beliefs, relationships, norms and stereotypes, and other reasons (Kugler et al., 2018; Odell, 2020; Reif et al., 2019; Reyes et al., 2021; Seligman et al., 2018; Stevens & Whelan, 2019). Addressing strategies associated with gender differences and their impact on negotiations is beyond the scope of this brief. However, it is appropriate to examine salary transparency as a potential solution to the issue of pay disparity. Nebraska's Superintendent Pay Transparency Act (NSPTA) establishes stipulations and expectations regarding the publication of superintendent contracts (Gessford, 2014), providing visibility into compensation practices for the profession. Other Midwest states do not have such a robust policy.*

**Keywords:** Salary negotiations, salary differences by gender, pay disparity

Salary differences of females compared to their male counterparts start at the beginning of their careers and continue to grow over their years of employment (Biasi & Sarsons, 2022; Blau & Kahn, 2017). According to Kugler et al. (2018) and their meta-analysis of the literature associated with gender differences in negotiations, the impact gender has on negotiations highlights the inequality of resource distribution while also reinforcing the gender wage gap. In a 2017 Pew Research survey, 42% of working women respondents experienced earnings discrimination based on gender (Barroso & Brown, 2021, para. 6). In addition, the U. S. Census Bureau's 2019 report, *Income and Poverty in the United States*, indicated that females earned 82.3 cents for every \$1.00 made by males (Semega et al., 2020, p. 10, Figure 5).

This discrepancy is especially noticeable at the higher end of the salary scale (Albrecht et al., 2015; Blau & Kahn, 2017). The 2020-2021 American Association of School Administrators (AASA) nationwide survey gathered data, including salaries for various positions, gender, and school enrollment size. Results of this national survey indicated that the base salaries of superintendents reflect the discrepancy in the earning power between males and females. Female superintendents reported their median salary as \$127,961 with ranges between \$65,000 and \$223,000 compared to the male superintendents' median salary of \$157,000, with ranges between \$102,000 and \$345,000 (AASA, 2021, p. 26, Table 2.2).

The issue is further raised by the International Labour Organization (2020) when considering the gender pay gap as a quantifiable measure of disparity between women and men. Parmer (2021) highlights the concern regarding the gender pay gap as equality between the genders only exists when power, wealth, and benefits are equally distributed. Furthermore, gender inequality infringes upon freedoms and rights, leading to discrimination (Parmer, 2021).

Through negotiation, candidates bargain for access to opportunities and resources (Northouse, 2019). Literature reviews indicate that women engage in negotiation at a much lower rate than men (Biasi & Sarsons, 2022; Fischer & Bajaj, 2017; Kugler et al., 2018). After carefully reviewing the literature, Mozahem et al. (2021) concluded that women who negotiate do not have the confidence men have and set lower goals for their negotiations. Ultimately, being less assertive or electing to forego negotiating leads females to risk earning lower incomes (Kray et al., 2012).

While Nebraska's Superintendent Pay Transparency Act dictates stipulations and expectations regarding publishing superintendent contracts (Gessford, 2014), some Midwest states do not have such a robust policy. Access to such contracts could allow for data analysis and the potential use of such data to become talking points for females during negotiations.

### **Approach and Results**

The negotiation process is one of the most significant conversations people have because the outcome impacts the entirety of an individual's life, family, and financial status (Rua et al., 2021). Negotiations associated with salary provide an opportunity to improve resources, tasks, and monetary compensation (Säve-Söderbergh, 2019). By utilizing negotiations, one may profit through improvements in salaries, benefits, and careers. Conversely, not taking advantage of a negotiation opportunity can be detrimental (Kugler et al., 2018). Northouse (2019) explains that while men readily self-promote and negotiate, women are less likely to do so. Literature suggests

five topics attributable to women's performance during negotiations (Kugler et al., 2018; Odell, 2020; Reif et al., 2019; Reyes et al., 2021; Seligman et al., 2018; Stevens & Whelan, 2019).

### **Topic 1: Gender Differences**

The female gender role does not fit the negotiator role, typically aligned with the male gender role when viewing this phenomenon through social role theory (Eagly & Wood, 2013; Stuhlmacher & Linnabery, 2013). This discrepancy brings about the challenge that women who participate in the action of negotiating are behaving outside of their female gender role, thereby opposing their gender-based identity and running the risk of social backlash (Kugler et al., 2018; Schneider, 2018). Based on the Kugler et al. (2018) meta-analysis studying gender differences in negotiations, women question their effectiveness in negotiations because their self-perception does not fit the expectations of an effective negotiator, as qualities ascribed to males are often associated with effective negotiations. In contrast, the qualities of females run counter to effective negotiation skills (Kugler et al., 2018). Women tend to cooperate more and assert themselves less than men in the negotiation process (Faes et al., 2010).

Furthermore, women engage in negotiations at a much lower rate than men (Biasi & Sarsons, 2022; Kugler et al., 2018). The global staffing firm of Robert Half found that professional women have increased their involvement in negotiations from 34 percent in 2017 to 45 percent in 2018. However, these numbers remain low compared to their male counterparts, who negotiated at a rate of 46 percent in 2017 and 68 percent in 2018 (Gurchiek, 2019, para. 3).

While women do not have the opportunity to negotiate at the same level as their male counterparts, women are just as likely as men to negotiate (Leibbrandt & List, 2015; Stevens & Whelan, 2019). Studies found that women who negotiate are less aggressive and less effective than their male counterparts (Coghlan, 2018; Mazei et al., 2015). Past research suggests women ask for thirty percent less salary than their male counterparts (Schneider, 2018, p. 698). An Australian-based study using data from a workplace survey distributed in 2013-2014 found women were not as successful at receiving what they asked for (Artz et al., 2018).

### **Topic 2: Beliefs**

Females have decreased beliefs in their competency and confidence regarding negotiations which complicates the negotiation process (Reif et al., 2019). Women often do not recognize their worth and undervalue themselves because they are less aware of the market value of their skills (Schneider, 2018). Therefore, women may have lower pay expectations than their male counterparts (Mazei et al., 2015). These lower expectations could lead women to believe that the offer provided is all they deserve (Fischer & Bajaj, 2017). Also, drawing from experiences in negotiations in the business world and investment banking, women attribute employment offers as an act of luck and not a reflection on their abilities which inhibits them from asking for anything for fear of jeopardizing the offer (Miller & Miller, 2002). These beliefs support the suggestion that women do not negotiate as strongly as men and, as a result, accept lower outcomes (Mazei et al., 2015).

Women also believe opportunities and salary increases will come through good behavior, hard work, and following the rules (Fischer & Bajaj, 2017). Women, therefore, wait for

recognition instead of asking (Babcock & Laschever, 2003). By taking an approach that allows others to make the monetary decisions associated with their work, women give up their control, leading to a softer negotiation approach (Schneider, 2018).

### **Topic 3: Relationships**

Women's value and fear of harming relationships also impact the decision to enter negotiations (Odell, 2020; Reyes et al., 2021). Qualitative research on relationships in the supply chain and negotiations notes relationships are meaningful as they impact future interactions (Thomas et al., 2015). Women fear a negative perception brought about through negotiations, and they are hesitant to jeopardize relationships by asking in the process of negotiations (Fischer & Bajaj, 2017). Schneider (2018) reviewed literature relevant to females and negotiation to address perceptions and noted that evaluators, regardless of their gender, viewed women who negotiated as unlikeable and aggressive. In addition, colleagues preferred not to work with women who have negotiated (Kennedy & Kray, 2015; Schneider, 2018).

### **Topic 4: Norms and Stereotypes**

Drawing from gender and negotiation literature, a narrative review by Seligman et al. (2018) indicates women face stereotyping regarding behaviors and regarding how others believe they should behave. As a result, when women violate socially accepted gender roles and actively negotiate, they are likely to face social backlash as they violate behavioral stereotypes (Seligman et al., 2018; Williams & Tiedens, 2016).

Furthermore, gender role stereotypes negatively affected women's relationships and economic outcomes (Rua et al., 2021). Females are more frequently punished when they negotiate for salary, considerations of hire-ability, promotions, and professional relationships (Bowles & Babcock, 2013). Lower salary requests and women receiving less than their requests supported the relationship of gender stereotypes in negotiations (Bowles, 2013; Säve-Söderbergh, 2019). As it stands then, women are at a disadvantage as there is a cost for both compliance with and breach of gender norms (Toosi et al., 2019). Within the pay-setting employer's offer, gender bias and discrimination play a role (Coghlan, 2018), with men having an advantage over women concerning negotiating power (Card et al., 2016).

### **Topic 5: Other Reasons**

Previous negotiating experiences could affect negotiation perceptions (Stevens & Whelan, 2019). Women may not know how to perform negotiations, may view negotiations as something to avoid, or may not recognize some of the aspects that are up for negotiation (Fischer & Bajaj, 2017). There are structural factors like "low initial offers and the availability of alternative offers" that are impactful as well (Stevens & Whelan, 2019, p. 143).

## **Conclusions**

Although the Equal Pay Act was signed into law in 1963, the Institute for Women’s Policy Research suggests equal pay between the two biological genders will not be equal until 2059 (Hegewisch & Mariano, 2020). When examining the gender pay gap, 10-15% of it can be attributed to differences in power associated with gender (Card et al., 2016; S ave-Soderbergh, 2019). In 2020, women’s earning power was 84% of their male counterparts (Barroso & Brown, 2021). To recoup the difference, women need to work 42 additional days to earn the same salary as men (Barroso & Brown, 2021).

The gender wage gap is in part ascribed to females’ behavior to negotiate less regularly and less effectively than their male counterparts (Biasi & Sarsons, 2022; Kugler et al., 2018). Gender differences are influential in negotiation behaviors and are also associated with the wage gap (Catalyst, 2021). When acknowledging females’ careers over their lifetimes, the ripple effect associated with the outcomes of negotiations cannot be overlooked (Pardal et al., 2020). Evelyn Murphy, economist and president of The Wage Project, estimates a female professional school graduate could lose earnings of up to two million dollars over forty-seven years of full-time work (National, 2020). Recognizing the impact gender differences have on negotiations highlights the inequitable allocation of funds between males and females while reinforcing the gender wage gap (Kugler et al., 2018).

While addressing strategies associated with differences ascribed to gender and its impact on negotiation is beyond the scope of this brief, it is appropriate to examine salary transparency as a potential solution to the disparity in pay between men and women. Encouraging salary transparency would provide women access to information that allows comparison to colleagues’ earnings, which may spark them to negotiate actively for themselves (Coghlan, 2018). Klein et al. (2021) suggest increased attention is needed when defining pay by “breaking apart total pay packages” (p. 748). Nebraska’s Superintendent Pay Transparency Act (NSPTA) provides access to superintendents’ earnings and breaks compensation packages apart.

For some of Nebraska’s female superintendents, the NSPTA has provided access to data, assisting them in their negotiations. For example, in a qualitative study exploring female superintendents’ negotiation experiences, some women compared their first negotiation upon entering the superintendency to subsequent negotiations. In connection to their initial negotiation, these women expressed an unknown element. They felt they were taken advantage of as they did not have access to data to determine if the contract offered was financially fair (Blaha, 2022). In Nebraska, superintendents with experience and access to such data reported relying on it heavily. Such access allowed negotiations to be data-driven with the expectation of reaching an agreement of fair compensation drawn from market value in connection to the work done (Blaha, 2022).

In contrast, female South Dakota superintendents described an overall different experience due to limited transparent and comparable data access. In the same qualitative study on the female superintendents’ negotiation experience, some South Dakota women referenced data and often gathered their own (Blaha, 2022). Other female superintendents noted the data available fell short as reference documents reported salary but not benefits, so they could not get a clear picture for comparison (Blaha, 2022).

Systematic changes are needed. Clear information needs to be available to eliminate the vagueness that disadvantages women – as, under these conditions, females often end up with lower incomes than their male counterparts (Ammerman & Groysberg, 2021). While pay

transparency will not solve all issues associated with gender wage disparity, the NSPTA provides Nebraska's female superintendents with data they can actively reference, helping them navigate the negotiation process with a greater sense of fairness (Blaha, 2022). Ultimately, attention needs to be drawn to the systems that slow women's progress because as long as women face bias and discrimination based on their gender, disparities will continue (Fernandez et al., 2021).

### **Implications and Recommendations**

A transparency policy such as Nebraska's comes with risks and benefits. Research suggests that employers fear reputational damage, increased costs, and increased employee turnover (Zenger, 2016). In addition, studies suggest transparency could bring dissatisfaction, a reduction in trust, increased conflict, lower morale amongst staff, and salary compression (Stofberg et al., 2022). For some employees, it is difficult to accurately evaluate performance which will impact perceptions of fairness associated with transparency in salary (Stofberg et al., 2022).

Despite such risks, research suggests tangible benefits. Pay transparency provides access to more information, allowing discernment of associated fairness (Zenger, 2019). Furthermore, transparency can help reduce pay inequality, especially regarding gender (Castilla, 2015; Cullen & Pakzad-Hurson, 2017; Kim, 2015). Findings by Kim (2015) are especially encouraging as transparency benefitted college-educated women. By exposing pay inequalities, remediation efforts can occur, thus helping affected employees (Smit & Montag-Smit, 2019). In addition, transparency can foster employees' perceptions of fairness and justice (Stofberg et al., 2022). Finally, Smit and Montag-Smit (2019) suggest that transparency associated with pay "provides employees powerful knowledge" (p. 555).

It is noteworthy that many of the studies referenced in this section are business-based. Direct comparisons to education may be difficult as there are potentially several employees within a specific job title in a company. Conversely, each school district is a unique entity that employs only one superintendent. Educational systems must publicize pay and different states have different educational organizations responsible for gathering statewide salary information for members' use. Some suggest this data is incomplete as it reports salary, not complete compensation packages, thus limiting effective comparisons and usefulness (Blaha, 2022).

For rural Midwest states to take pay transparency to the next level, lawmakers need to follow the advice of Klein et al. (2021) and undertake a more detailed pay review. This is what the NSPTA has done. While the act has not solved all gender pay gap problems, it offers increased visibility into compensation practices. A review of the NSPTA with consideration for application in rural Midwest states could be a step toward systemic change addressing the disparity associated with in-state pay.

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# Student Satisfaction and Perceived Learning in Online Learning Environments: An Instrument Development and Validation Study

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The *Student Learning and Satisfaction in Online Learning Environments (SLS-OLE)* is an easy to administer 19-item, self-report measure of student learning and satisfaction in online learning environments. Past studies have reported a measure of four domains of perceived learning and satisfaction associated with their experiences with online learning in higher education. The purpose of this paper was to examine the factor structure of the SLS-OLE with a large sample of graduate students at one university located in the southeastern United States. To assess the fit of the data to the four-factor structure, a confirmatory factor analysis was employed on data collected from 337 participants pursuing an online graduate degree in educational leadership. Results indicate the model adequately fits the data and findings signify that instructor presence is the best predictor of both student satisfaction and perceived learning.

*Keywords:* course structure and organization, learner interaction, instructor presence, student engagement, and online learning, instrument validation

## Background

Studies have shown that course structure or organization, learner interaction, student engagement, and instructor presence accounts for considerable variance in student satisfaction and perceived learning in online learning environments through a range of pathways. The present research will investigate the psychometric properties of the researcher created instrument used to measure the various relationships. This study aims to further test and refine the Student Learning and Satisfaction in Online Learning Environments Instrument (SLS-OLE). The results of this study should provide educators with a psychometrically-sound instrument that can be used to measure the impact of course structure or organization, learner interaction, student engagement, and instructor presence on both student satisfaction and perceived learning.

Online learning environments are becoming the norm rather than the exception in higher education. As such, it is important to understand what students report about what makes them satisfied with their experiences in online courses as well as their beliefs about their learning based on those experiences. Past studies that investigated various aspects of course design, student engagement, instructor presence and feedback, and how students interact with one another in the learning environment have shown contradictory results (Eom et al., 2006; Gray & DiLoreto, 2016; Swan, 2001). Thus, the need for additional investigation is a worthy undertaking. Using the past research to guide the development of a questionnaire for use to investigate specific aspects of course design, student engagement, instructor presence, and learner-to-learner interaction, the researchers developed a 19-item questionnaire.

## Review of the Literature

Building upon a previous study by Eom et al. (2006), this study investigates the relationships of learning interaction (with instructor and one another), course structure, and instructor presence within online learning environments. Eom et al. (2006) surmised that course structure, instructor feedback, learning style, interaction, self-motivation, and instructor facilitation all significantly affected student satisfaction. However, the researchers (Eom et al., 2006) found that only learning style and instructor feedback significantly influenced perceived student learning outcomes. Student satisfaction was also a significant predictor of learning outcomes (Eom et al., 2006).

Richardson and Swan (2003) discovered that students who perceived high levels of instructor social presence in courses had greater satisfaction with their instructors. Student engagement and active learning are essential to increase student learning, which can lead to greater retention in programs (Richardson & Swan, 2003). Active discussion, positive interaction with instructors, and clarity of course design significantly impacted students' levels of perceived learning and satisfaction (Swan, 2001).

Many studies have investigated the effect of student engagement in online settings. Kuh and his colleagues discovered students perceived themselves to have greater learning gains and engagement in learning and coursework, as well as improved social skills (Barber, 2020; Hu & Kuh, 2001; Khan et al., 2021; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Kuh & Vesper, 2001; Surani & Hamidah, 2020). Based upon items from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) instrument (2008), Chen et al. (2010) explored the effects of student engagement. As students worked more

collaboratively, based upon course expectations, their perceptions of their participation in courses and engagement in their learning was increased (Duderstadt et al., 2002; Surani & Hamidah, 2020; Thurmond & Wambach, 2004). In understanding the factors that affect the engagement of online students, instructors can design better courses using effective instructional strategies to engage and promote active learning (Khan et al., 2021; Kucuk & Richardson, 2019; Misopoulos et al., 2018).

### **Course Structure and Organization**

The design and development of course curriculum, resources, strategies, schedule, and overall planning are important aspects of course organization and structure before, during, and after teaching a course (Garrison et al., 2000). Course expectations for assignments, guidelines, assessment rubrics, due dates, and content-related resources are provided to support student learning and academic success (Gray & DiLoreto, 2015). Instructional management includes the “explicit and implicit structural parameters and organizational guidelines” of a course (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 101). Course structure, including communication of expectations and objectives, is considered one of the most important variables that affects students’ perceptions about online courses (Misopoulos et al., 2018; Moore, 1991).

A course should be user-friendly, organized in a logical manner, and detailed about what is expected for students to learn and achieve (Eom et al., 2006). Instructors “need the expertise to develop a class structure” that promotes rigorous standards, social interaction, and independent learning for students (Muirhead, 2004, p. 50). Additional support, assistance, or training should be provided to those teachers lacking the appropriate skills to plan, design, and develop courses that are engaging (Vargas, 2014). How students view the ‘overall usability’ of a course is likely correlated to their levels of learning and satisfaction. If a course is logically laid out and well-organized, students are more likely to be satisfied with what they learn in the course (Eom et al., 2006). Jaggars and Xu (2016) surmised that quality online courses had the following characteristics in common: a variety of interpersonal interactions (with other students and instructor), effective use of technology, well-organized content, and well-defined objectives.

### **Learner Interaction**

In online learning environments, students often feel distanced and disconnected from their instructor and other students. Learner interaction includes communication with the instructor, classmates, and course content (lessons, discussions, etc.) which may occur formally or informally (Alqurashi, 2019). By connecting course content and assignments to current problems or issues from the field of study, students are able to connect the theoretical to their professional or practical experience. This allows for deeper involvement in assignments and discussions with colleagues (Shearer, 2003).

Instructors can strengthen their connections with their students by offering detailed and constructive feedback about class performances and suggesting specific ways to improve their writing and such (Muirhead, 2004). Further, choices and options to allow for flexibility in completing assignments allows students to take more ownership of their learning and to have a more individualized learning experience (Collis, 1998). Instructors can integrate the following

strategies to encourage greater interaction among students in the online learning environment: promoting critical thinking, sharing biographical posts (students and instructors alike), offering constructive and positive feedback about assignments, integrating examples and stories into course discussions and content, allowing flexibility within the structure and schedule of the course, and connecting the current and relevant issues (Muirhead, 2004). In requiring students to think about their thinking, the instructor can model metacognitive and reflective thinking skills (Muirhead, 2004).

When designing the course content and assignments, a variety of research-based resources and perspectives should be considered to allow students to question their assumptions and beliefs about content (Collision et al., 2000; Muirhead, 2004). Sufficient time should be provided to allow for deeper thinking, critical reflection, and more interaction with classmates via discussions (Garrison et al., 2000). The level of interpersonal interaction was found to be a predictor of student grades. Students enrolled in low-interaction courses tend to earn a letter grade lower than those in high-interaction courses (Jaggars et al., 2013).

### **Instructor Presence**

How a course is organized, designed, supported, and taught with many opportunities for positive interaction between the students and teacher promotes greater instructor presence (Jaggars et al., 2013; Karmin et al., 2006). Social presence, slightly different than instructor presence, has been described as the “degree of feeling, perception, and reaction of being connected by computer mediated communication” (Tu & Mclsaac, 2002, p. 40). Establishing the instructor’s presence and personality in discussions, assignments, and discussions are very important in online courses (Shea et al., 2006). Instructors can also embed a “sense of caring by soliciting student feedback about the course and using that feedback to enhance the course” (Jaggars et al., 2013, p. 6).

There are three indicators for instructor presence: direct instruction, building understanding, and instructional management (Garrison et al., 2000). Direct instruction involves indirect and direct teaching including lectures (video, audio, etc.), asynchronous and synchronous sessions, the selection of all course content (readings, videos, etc.), and all feedback provided to students (Garrison et al., 2000). By actively engaging with students, an instructor can redirect attention, draw in those less engaged, validate others’ contributions to discussions, and guide the learning process (Barber, 2020; Garrison et al., 2000; Park & Kim, 2020). Finally, how the course is organized and structured, which have already been described, are considered to be the instructional management of the course.

The sense of a learning community and the instructor’s presences in online courses tend to have a reciprocal relationship, in that one influences the development or depth of the other (Shea et al., 2006). Online learning tools and resources can assist instructors in establishing an approachable and knowledgeable presence in their courses (Jaggars et al., 2013). Some argue that teachers have to be more intentional in connecting with students in an online setting, which can be more challenging than in face-to-face courses (Jaggars et al., 2013; Park & Kim, 2020). Students are more likely to excel in courses where they have more opportunities for interpersonal communication and interaction (Jaggars et al., 2013). Continuous communication

detailed and consistent feedback, and opportunities for critical reflection promote greater instructor presence in online learning environments (Garrison et al., 2000; Jaggars et al., 2013).

Integrating audio and video synchronously and asynchronously gives students the chance to connect with their instructors on a more personal level (Anderson et al., 2001). Professors can share relevant examples or personal experiences related to the course discussion or content and respond immediately to students' questions, which can alleviate concerns or worries (Anderson et al., 2001; Park & Kim, 2020). In responding promptly to students, seeking student feedback about ways to improve the course, and asking follow-up questions, instructors' presence is perceived as greater by students (Jaggars et al., 2013). By allowing students to participate in interactive sessions, students feel as though they are more familiar and acquainted with their instructors and fellow students (Gray & DiLoreto, 2015). Using interactive technologies can improve academic performance and student learning outcomes (Jaggars et al., 2013).

In comparing students' perceptions of instructor presence and a sense of community, students who receive asynchronous audio feedback, versus those who only are given text-based feedback, are more satisfied (Ice et al., 2007). Students perceive the audio feedback shows their professors care more and provide clearer communication, which they three times more likely to make the recommended changes (Ice et al., 2007). Instructors who facilitate online learning by combining video, audio, discussion, practical activities, chats, and other online tools develop more supportive learning environments than those who do not (Jaggars et al., 2013).

## **Student Engagement**

Student engagement is a "students' willingness, need, desire, and compulsion to participate in, and be successful in, the learning process" (Bomia et al., 1997, p. 294).

Different pedagogical strategies are needed for online learning environments to promote engagement and learning opportunities. Moving beyond any skills that can be learned, engagement emphasizes a person's attitudes or dispositions about past experiences related to learning (Mandernach et al., 2011). Student engagement includes how students interact with others in a course, the level of interest they show, and their desire or motivation to learn about the subject area (Briggs, 2015).

Attitude, motivation, personality, effort, and self-confidence are several of the affective factors that relate to student engagement (Mandernach et al., 2011). According to Jaggars and Xu (2016) the quality of course interaction is positively correlated to online students' grades. In considering the affective aspects of student engagement, professors are able to develop and plan more effective activities and lessons to encourage more active participation in course assignments and learning (Jennings & Angelo, 2006; Mandernach et al., 2011).

There are several kinds of student engagement, including behavioral emotional, cognitive, and agentic (Alqurashi, 2019; Barber, 2020; Ferrer et al., 2020; Fredricks et al., 2004; Kucuk & Richardson, 2019; Reeve & Tseng, 2011). Behavioral engagement is defined as "students' attention, effort, and persistence in learning" (Kucuk & Richardson, 2019, p. 198). Emotional engagement relates to having high levels of interest and positive emotions about a course (Kucuk & Richardson, 2019). Students' sharing of strategic thinking and strategies used to learn demonstrate cognitive engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004; Kucuk & Richardson, 2019; Reeve & Tseng, 2011). Finally, academic engagement is described as the "students' constructive

contribution to the flow of the instruction they receive (Ferrer et al., 2020; Kucuk & Richardson, 2019; Reeve & Tseng, 2011).

When students are willing to exert more effort than expected, invested in a desire to learn and grow, and motivated to succeed in classes, they tend to be more engaged in their coursework and education (Mandernach et al., 2011). Traditionally, instructional effectiveness is measured by students' perceptions of satisfaction in their learning and how they master course objectives. Course engagement extends to "considerations of the impact of instructional activities on student engagement provides a more complete picture of the teaching-learning dynamic" (Mandernach et al., 2011, p. 277). In determining the level of student engagement, instructors can adapt their pedagogical practices to respond to changes in students' attitudes, involvement, and motivation about their education (Ferrer et al., 2020; Kucuk & Richardson, 2019; Mandernach et al., 2011).

Online instructors have access to many tools to gather formal and informal data about how their students are participating and engaging in a course. Professors can analyze student time online, views of content (videos, modules, readings, etc.), log-in data, and other self-reported data (surveys, discussions, reflections, etc.) as ways to assess student engagement (Gray & DiLoreto, 2016). It is also important to determine if students have enough opportunities to interact with one another and the instructor in meaningful and challenging ways that enrich their educational experience (Khan et al., 2021; Langley, 2006). At the end of the semester, student feedback and survey results can be analyzed and considered as a part of an effort to improve a course from term to term.

## **Student Satisfaction**

Numerous studies have been conducted to determine the level of student satisfaction in traditional and online environments (Barber, 2020; Beqiri et al., 2010; Marsh & Roche, 1997; Misopoulos et al., 2018; Shea et al., 2003; Wang et al., 2004). Wang et al. (2004) found that students were more apt to rate professors and courses positively if they perceived the instructors to facilitate and encourage learning, communicate effectively, organize the course well, evaluate coursework fairly, and show genuine interest in students' progress and learning in the course. Marsh and Roche (1997) created a model for determining students' perceptions of satisfaction, which measured instructor enthusiasm, rapport, coverage of content, learning value of subject area, interaction, organization, and assessment. In another study, students who were enrolled in cohorts and received specific, detailed feedback from and positive interaction with instructors were more satisfied with their educational experiences (Shea et al., 2003).

There are four factors related to student satisfaction in an online learning environment to include: amount of on-task time, engaged and active learning, cooperation among students, and faculty and student communication and interaction (Bangert, 2006). In comparing student satisfaction based upon types of feedback received, Ice et al. (2017) discovered students preferred text and embedded asynchronous audio feedback, rather than just text feedback. The communication was clearer and sincere concern of the professor was conveyed. Students were three times more likely to make the suggested changes when they received audio feedback (Ice et al., 2007).

Beqiri et al. (2010) determined that graduate courses were better suited for graduate students, as opposed to undergraduate students who benefitted from face-to-face courses. Finally, students who had prior knowledge about course content were more likely to be satisfied with online course delivery (Beqiri et al. 2010). Additionally, students who liked how a course was structured were more likely to be satisfied with their perceptions about what they learned in the course (Adams, 2017; Tu & Corry, 2002). Finally, Kucuk and Richardson (2019) found cognitive and teaching presence, as well as emotional, behavioral, and cognitive engagement, to be significant predictors of student satisfaction.

## **Perceived Learning**

For this study, students were asked to assess their perceptions of their learning in a specific course for spring 2015 semester. It was requested that students reflect upon the course assignments, level of learning they experienced, and benefits gained from the course (Gray & DiLoreto, 2016). The educational leadership students were also asked how well the course prepared them as future instructional leaders. As more online programs are being offered, especially at the graduate level, it is important to consider the needs of the adult learner (Trekles, 2013). For example, if students evaluate what was learned in a course as limited or minimal, then instructors are responsible for redesigning the course, improving instructional strategies, and providing more effective assessment in the course (Gray & DiLoreto, 2015).

## **Research Questions**

1. What is the factor structure of an instrument designed to assess student satisfaction and perceived learning?
2. How does the model fit the data collected from students completing an online graduate educational leadership program?

## **Methods**

### **Participants and design**

We conducted this validation study in two steps. First, we performed an exploratory factor analysis on a sample of graduate educational leadership students ( $N = 156$ ) age 18 years or older at a public Southeastern university during the fall semester of 2015. Students completed a questionnaire using Qualtrics. All study procedures were approved by the university's IRB. Students had, on average, completed eight online courses in their program of study ( $SD = 1.02$ ); 46 (29.5%) were men; 107 (68.6%) were women; 3 (1.9%) did not indicate their gender. 32 (20.6%) were 21-30 years old; 55 (35.5%) were 31-40 years old; 55 (35.5%) were 41-50 years old; 13 (8.4%) were over 50 years old.

Next, the optimal factor structure that resulted from the first was cross-validated using a different sample of graduate educational leadership students ( $N = 337$ ) age 18 years or older at the same institution during the spring semester of 2018. As before, students completed a questionnaire using Qualtrics and the study procedures were approved by the university's IRB.

Half ( $n = 171$ ; 50.3%) of the students had completed at least seven online courses in their program of study; 70 (20.6%) were male; 269 (79.1%) were female; 1 (0.3%) did not indicate their gender. Sixty-two (18.2%) were 21-30 years old; 150 (44.1%) were 31-40 years old; 98 (28.8%) were 41-50 years old; 30 (8.8%) were over 50 years old.

## **Measures**

### ***Course Quality***

We began with a pool of 19 items derived from a review of the literature. We hypothesized that the items reflected the underlying dimensions of “course structure and organization,” “learner interaction,” “student engagement,” and “instructor presence.” Responses were given on a six-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = mostly disagree; 3 = slightly agree; 4 = moderately agree; 5 = mostly agree; 6 = strongly agree). In the Exploratory Analysis sample, the scales were acceptable to strong internal consistency: course structure and organization ( $\alpha = .89$ ); learner interaction ( $\alpha = .86$ ); student engagement ( $\alpha = .73$ ); instructor presence ( $\alpha = .82$ ). In the Confirmatory Analysis sample, the scales were acceptable to strong internal consistency: course structure and organization ( $\alpha = .89$ ); learner interaction ( $\alpha = .86$ ); student engagement ( $\alpha = .73$ ); instructor presence ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

### ***Student Satisfaction***

Student Satisfaction was a scale composed of the average scores across five items that were rated on a six-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = mostly disagree; 3 = slightly agree; 4 = moderately agree; 5 = mostly agree; 6 = strongly agree). The items were (1) I am satisfied with my overall experience in the course; (2) I am satisfied with the level of student interaction that occurred in the course; (3) I am satisfied with my learning in the course; (4) I am satisfied with the course instructor; and (5) I am satisfied with the course content. In the Exploratory Analysis, the scale had a strong internal consistency,  $\alpha = .86$ . In the Confirmatory Analysis sample, the scales were acceptable to strong internal consistency: course structure and organization ( $\alpha = .89$ ); learner interaction ( $\alpha = .86$ ); student engagement ( $\alpha = .73$ ); instructor presence ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

### ***Perceived Learning***

Perceived Learning was a scale composed of the average scores across four items that were rated on a six-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = mostly disagree; 3 = slightly agree; 4 = moderately agree; 5 = mostly agree; 6 = strongly agree). The items were (1) The learning tasks enhanced my understanding of the content; (2) I learned skills that will help me in the future; (3) The learning activities promoted the achievement of the student learning outcomes; and (4) The course contributed to my professional development. In the Exploratory Analysis, the scale had a strong internal consistency,  $\alpha = .88$ . In the Confirmatory Analysis sample, the scales were acceptable to strong internal consistency: course structure and organization ( $\alpha = .89$ ); learner interaction ( $\alpha = .86$ ); student engagement ( $\alpha = .73$ ); instructor presence ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

## **Analysis plan**

### ***Exploratory Analysis***

For the first step, we used exploratory factor analysis (principal axis factoring with direct oblimin rotation) to determine the optimal factor structure of the four theoretical dimensions of course quality. We used an oblique rotation strategy because our goal was to account for the relationships among the factors. We have no theoretical evidence to suggest the underlying course quality dimensions would not be related to one another. Researchers have argued that oblique rotations should be used first and can even be used if the factors are uncorrelated (Beavers et al., 2013; Fabrigar et al., 1999).

Following the best practices outlined by Field (2018), Costello and Osbourne (2004), and Henson and Roberts (2006), we tested the hypotheses of the factor analysis by examining the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett chi square statistics and communalities coefficients. We examined the underlying dimensionality of the factors using Kaiser's criteria and a visual inspection of the scree plot. The pattern and structure matrices were examined to determine if the factor loadings were sufficient and to identify any potential concerns with cross loading. The factor correlation matrix verified the hypothesized interrelationship among the dimensions of course quality.

For evidence of convergent validity, we correlated the four course design dimensions with the two outcome measures. We also sought to provide early evidence of predictive validity by regressing the dimensions on each outcome after controlling for age, gender, and the number of online courses a student had previously completed. All analyses at this step used SPSS (version 25).

### ***Confirmatory Analysis***

For the second step, we used confirmatory factor analysis (maximum likelihood estimation) to cross validate the proposed factor structure of the four theoretical dimensions of course quality. Consistent with traditional CFA approaches, we tested several models: a null model, a model with correlated factors and uncorrelated item error variances, and a model with correlated factors and error variances. Factor loadings were fully estimated, meaning the latent factor variances were each fixed at 1.0. Model adequacy was assessed relative to several benchmarks (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Schreiber et al., 2006): normed chi-square ( $\chi^2/df$ ) < 5.0; CFI and TLI > .90; and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) < .08. We conducted these analyses using AMOS (version 23).

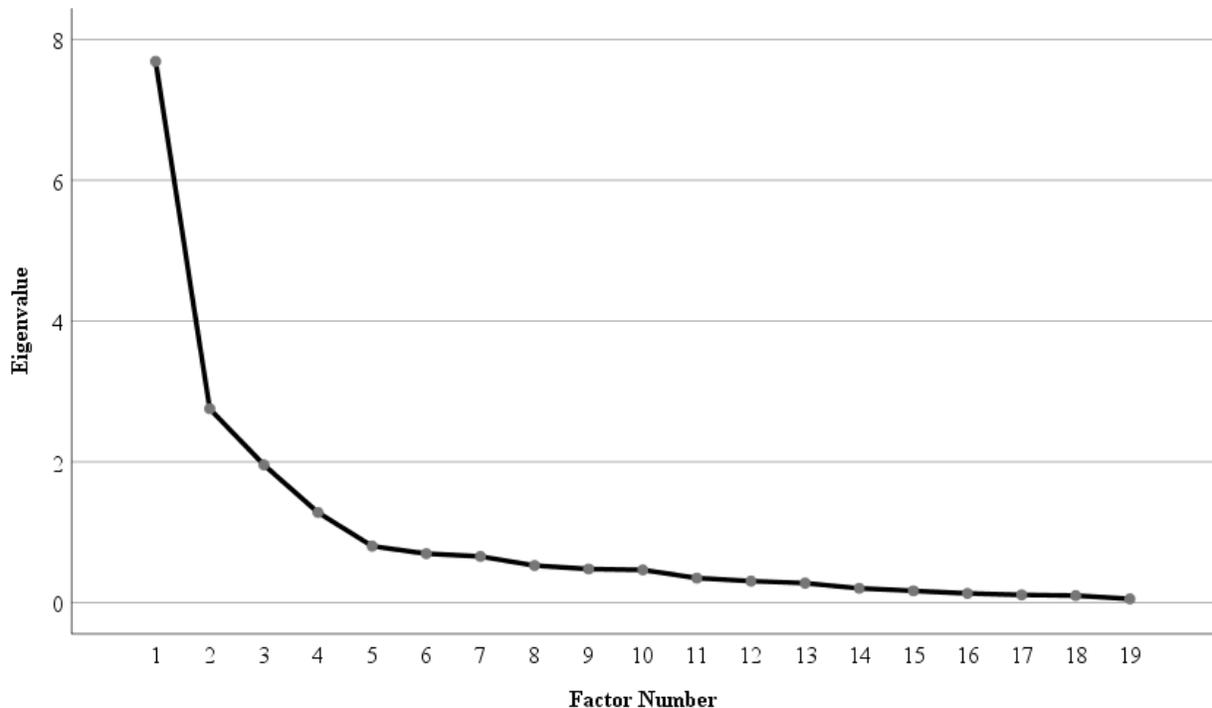
We also sought to cross validate the early evidence of convergent and predictive validity found in step one by replicating the process in the second sample. As before, we correlated the four dimensions with the two outcome measures and regressed the four dimensions on each outcome after controlling for age, gender, and the number of online courses the student had previously completed. We conducted these analyses using SPSS (version 25).

## **Results**

## Exploratory Analysis

The KMO and Bartlett statistics verified the sampling adequacy for the initial pool of items, KMO = .83,  $\chi^2(171) = 2021.99$ ,  $p < .001$ . Item communalities ranged from .38 to .90 after extraction. Four factors emerged with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 and explained 72.00% of the variance. The scree plot (Figure 1) showed inflections that would justify retaining four factors.

**Figure 1**  
*Screen Plot of Inflections for Four Factors*



The pattern matrix indicated two items that required further investigation. In one case, an item related to participation in class discussions (a hypothesized engagement variable) cross-loaded on two factors (student engagement and instructor presence). We could not justify mapping that item to the instructor's presence and removed it from the pool. In a second case, an item cross loaded on the "student engagement and instructor feedback dimensions. After inspection, we deduced that the potential source of the cross-loading was the word "feedback" found in the item description. That word is prevalent among multiple items in the instructor presence dimension when referring student-instructor feedback and communication. The student engagement construct (to which this item was ultimately retained) dealt explicitly with peer feedback.

The resulting structure matrix indicated no significant cross-correlations among the items and factors. The factor correlation matrix confirmed that the four underlying dimensions were significantly correlated with one another. The final factor analysis results from the 19 retained items are displayed in Table 1. The overall scale alpha was .91.

**Table 1**

*Results from Exploratory Factor Analysis*

	<i>h</i> <sup>2</sup>	Factor Loadings			
		<u>1</u>	<u>2</u> Course Structure & Organization	<u>3</u> Student Engagement	<u>4</u> Learner Interaction
1. Student learning outcomes were aligned to the learning activities.	.79		<b>.86</b>		
2. Course navigation was arranged in a logical manner.	.40		<b>.64</b>		
3. Instructions about student participation were clearly presented.	.77		<b>.86</b>		
4. The purpose of the course was clearly presented.	.85		<b>.91</b>		
5. I frequently interacted with other students in the course.	.69				<b>-.78</b>
6. The learning activities promoted interaction with others.	.73				<b>-.82</b>
7. I had the opportunity to introduce myself to others in the class.	.53				<b>-.76</b>
8. I communicated often with other students in the course.	.55				<b>-.73</b>
9. I received ongoing feedback from my classmates.	.57	.32			<b>-.37</b>
10. I frequently interacted with my instructor of this course.	.58	.38		<b>.57</b>	
11. I discussed what I learned in the course outside of class.	.38			<b>.35</b>	
12. I completed my readings as assigned during the course.	.49			<b>.65</b>	
13. I participated in synchronous and/or asynchronous chat sessions during the course.	.52			<b>.71</b>	

14. I was actively engaged in the activities required in the course.			<b>.39</b>
15. The instructor's feedback on assignments was clearly stated.	.90	<b>.96</b>	
16. The instructor's feedback on assignments was constructive.	.83	<b>.90</b>	
17. The instructor provided timely feedback about my progress in the course.	.78	<b>.84</b>	
18. The instructor cared about my progress in the course.	.65	<b>.62</b>	
19. I learned from the feedback that was provided during the course.	.73	<b>.64</b>	

Factor correlations (Variance Explained)

Instructor Presence	(40.5%)			
Course Structure & Organization	.26	(14.5%)		
Student Engagement	.29	.04	(10.3%)	
Learner Interaction	-.47	-.27	-.48	(6.7%)

To provide initial evidence of convergent validity, we estimated the correlations between the four course design dimensions and the two outcome measures. The correlation between student satisfaction and perceived learning was extremely large ( $r = .89, p < .001$ ). For student satisfaction, the correlations were: Course Structure & Organization (.32), Learner Interaction (.68), Student Engagement (.65), and Instructor Presence (.68). For Perceived Learning, the correlations were: Course Structure & Organization (.37), Learner Interaction (.55), Student Engagement (.62), and Instructor Presence (.68).

To provide initial evidence of predictive validity and assess the impact of the dimensions on the outcomes, we conducted two linear regressions. In the regression to assess the relative impact of the course design dimensions on student satisfaction. The model for student satisfaction was statistically significant ( $R^2 = .65, F(4,151) = 68.45, p < .001$ ). After controlling for age, gender, and number of online courses completed, three significant predictors emerged: Learner Interaction ( $\beta = .28, p < .001$ ), Student Engagement ( $\beta = .30, p < .001$ ), and Instructor Presence ( $\beta = .32, p < .001$ ). The model for perceived learning was also statistically significant,  $R^2 = .60, F(7,145) = 30.50, p < .001$ . After controlling for age, gender, and number of online courses completed, three significant predictors emerged: Course Structure & Organization ( $\beta = .16, p = .005$ ), Student Engagement ( $\beta = .30, p < .001$ ), and Instructor Presence ( $\beta = .47, p < .001$ ).

## Confirmatory Analysis

The null model was a terrible fit to these data:  $\chi^2(171) = 3785.62, p < .001$ ; TLI = .00, CFI = .00, RMSEA = .251, 90CI [.244, .258]. A single factor model where all items represent course design broadly was an improvement over the null model, but still a poor fit:  $\chi^2(152) = 1088.24, p < .001$ ; TLI = .709, CFI = .741, RMSEA = .135, 90CI [.128, .143].

The four-factor uncorrelated model generated from the exploratory analysis fit these data significantly better than the single factor model:  $\chi^2(152) = 1064.60, p < .001$ ; TLI = .716, CFI = .748, RMSEA = .134, 90CI [.126, .141]. To improve model fit, we correlated the four factors as further suggested by the exploratory analysis. Model fit improved over the four-factor uncorrelated version:  $\chi^2(146) = 404.48, p < .001$ ; TLI = .916, CFI = .928, RMSEA = .073, 90CI [.064, .081]. We next examined the potential correlation of item error variances within a factor. The decision to correlate these residuals was done in consideration of the conceptual validity to do so. One pair of items within the “Learner Interaction” factor was correlated,  $\vartheta_{5,8} (r = .467)$ . The resulting model was an improvement over the four-factor correlated model:  $\chi^2(145) = 363.52, p < .001$ ; TLI = .929, CFI = .940, RMSEA = .067, 90CI [.058, .076]. The results from model testing are displayed in Table 2. The final structural model is depicted in Figure 2. The overall scale alpha was .92 in this sample.

**Table 2**  
*Results from the Confirmatory Factor Analyses*

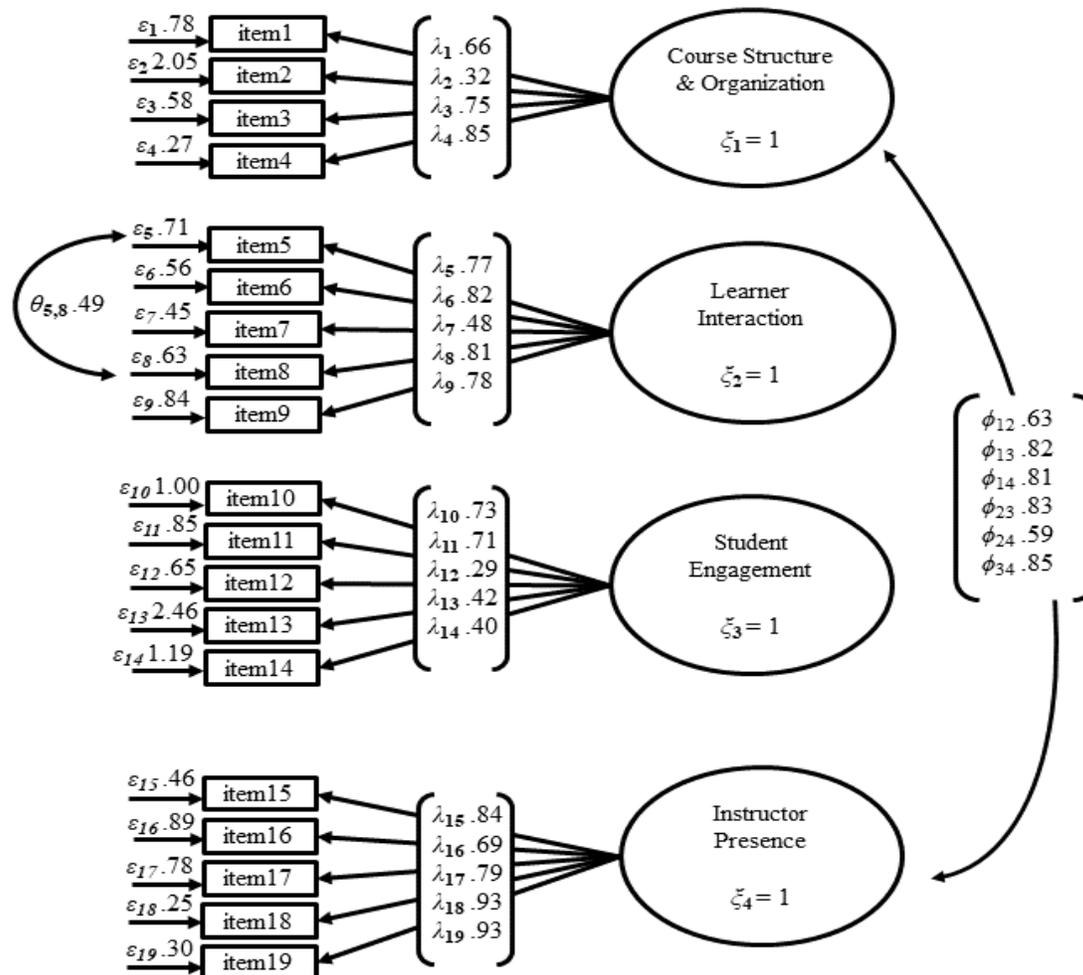
	$\chi^2/df$	CFI	TLI	RMSEA [90% CI]
Null Model	22.14	.00	.00	.25 [.24, .26]
1-Factor Model	7.16	.74	.71	.14 [.13, .14]
4-Factor Uncorrelated Model	7.00	.75	.72	.13 [.13, .14]
4-Factor Correlated Model	2.77	.93	.92	.07 [.06, .08]
4-Factor Correlated Model w/ Item Covariances	2.49	.94	.93	.07 [.06, .08]
	Factor			
<u>Factor correlations</u>	1	2	3	4
1. Instructor Presence	--			
2. Course Structure & Organization	.81	--		
3. Student Engagement	.85	.82	--	
4. Learner Interaction	.59	.63	.83	--

To provide additional evidence of convergent validity, we estimated the correlations between the four course design dimensions and the two outcome measures. The correlation

between student satisfaction and perceived learning was extremely large,  $r = .89$ ,  $p < .001$ . For student satisfaction, the correlations were: Course Structure & Organization (.71), Learner Interaction (.59), Student Engagement (.66), and Instructor Presence (.87). For Perceived Learning, the correlations were: Course Structure & Organization (.70), Learner Interaction (.56), Student Engagement (.64), and Instructor Presence (.74).

**Figure 2**

*Confirmatory factor analysis of course quality.  $\varepsilon$  = error.  $\vartheta$  = item correlation.  $\lambda$  = factor loadings.  $\xi$  = factor variances.  $\phi$  = factor correlations*



To provide additional evidence of predictive validity and assess the impact of the dimensions on the outcomes, we conducted two linear regressions. In the regression to assess the relative impact of the course design dimensions on student satisfaction. The model for student satisfaction was statistically significant,  $R^2 = .80$ ,  $F(7, 325) = 193.15$ ,  $p < .001$ . After controlling for age, gender, and number of online courses completed, all four dimensions were statistically significant predictors: Course Structure & Organization ( $\beta = .15$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Learner Interaction ( $\beta = .12$ ,  $p = .001$ ), Student Engagement ( $\beta = .13$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and Instructor Presence ( $\beta = .63$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The model for perceived learning was also statistically significant,  $R^2 = .66$ ,  $F(7, 325) = 90.30$ ,  $p < .001$ . After controlling for age, gender, and number of online courses completed, all

four dimensions were statistically significant predictors: Course Structure & Organization ( $\beta = .26$ ,  $p < .001$ ) Learner Interaction ( $\beta = .11$ ,  $p = .016$ ), Student Engagement ( $\beta = .19$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and Instructor Presence ( $\beta = .39$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

### **Discussion**

This study examined the factor structure of an instrument designed to assess course quality in a sample of educational leadership graduate students. We report results from exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses. We also provide early evidence of convergent and predictive validity by correlating the four dimensions of course quality with two outcome measures, student satisfaction and perceived learning. The results from both factor analyses showed a strong degree of concordance. The 19 items of the proposed scale were mapped to four distinct, yet interrelated factors. All items loaded onto their respective factors and the final model had acceptable fit.

Regression results indicated two important findings. First, instructor presence is the best predictor of student satisfaction and perceived learning. Despite being such a significant factor, the other three dimensions also uniquely contributed to the model in a statistically significant way. Therefore, we propose that all four dimensions are needed to best determine the potential impact on student satisfaction and perceived learning.

### **Limitations**

This study had several limitations. First, data were based on self-reports, which can be subject to social desirability and other biases. Assurances of anonymity were employed in the study design to enhance response accuracy and reduce threats to validity. We also used a convenience sample of graduate students in online courses in only one program of study. This type of sampling strategy potentially reduces the generalizability of study findings and does not permit causal inferences.

Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire with one course in mind. However, we realize this may have limited how they responded to the context of the various constructs. Additionally, students were permitted to complete the questionnaire more than once by using other courses as the basis for their responses. We acknowledge that these responses may have inflated the results for each participant.

### **Conclusions and Future Research**

Past studies have shown contradictory findings about the perceived learning and student satisfaction. This particular study was conducted by the researchers to solidify evidence of validity and reliability of the Student Learning and Satisfaction in Online Learning Environments (SLS-OLE) instrument. Results of EFA and CFA show promising evidence of a four-factor, correlated model including instructor presence, course structure/organization, student engagement, and learner interaction.

The researchers suggest future studies using participants at various degree-seeking levels (i.e., undergraduate and graduate) and from multiple disciplines. It is unclear how the reliability

and validity will change with other populations of students. Furthermore, it is unclear if the scale is invariant across groups (undergraduate versus graduates). Additional research is warranted to better understand the implications of the impacts of these factors on both perceived learning and student satisfaction.

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# Emergent Bilinguals and Multimedia Instructional Design: Applying the Science of Learning Principles to Dual Language Instruction

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*The purpose of this practice to theory article is to present educational leaders with critical considerations for multimedia instructional content for emergent bilinguals (EBs) in dual language programs and other EB academic settings. EBs' academic development and achievement are advanced when multimedia instruction is intentionally designed to address language inputs and science of learning principles for multimedia instruction. Instructional leadership practices for emergent bilinguals may benefit from an understanding of the connection between the science of learning principles for multimedia design and second language learning. This article begins with a brief discussion of EB instructional leadership and continues with an overview of language inputs and dual language instruction. Next, it introduces the cognitive theory of multimedia learning and science of learning principles focused on for this discussion. The article concludes with an example of the science of learning principles applied to a second language lesson and considerations for EB multimedia instruction design as educational leaders provide EB instructional leadership in schools and school districts.*

**Keywords:** dual language instruction, emergent bilinguals, English learners, instructional leadership, multimedia instruction, science of learning

Emergent bilinguals' academic development and advancement is supported through instructional programs and strategies that build on their linguistic assets and promote deeper learning. Although the term emergent bilingual (EB; Garcia & Wei, 2014) could refer to any student who is developing proficiency in two languages, its most common use signifies what the US Department of Education calls English learners, which are students who are in the process of acquiring a level of English proficiency that enables grade-level academic achievement, and who speak a different first language. Dual language programs, designed to develop bilingualism, have proven beneficial in furthering EBs' academic achievement. Likewise, the use of evidence-based instructional design models also facilitate EBs' teaching and learning. While there are several instructional design models, we focus on multimedia instructional design principles drawn from the cognitive theory of multimedia learning (CTML; Mayer, 2014). We chose CTML because instructional content in dual language classrooms (and other second language learning settings) includes multimedia instructional messages (Mayer, 2014) to facilitate second language learning. Using Mayer's (2008, 2014) definition, multimedia instructional messages in dual language classrooms refer to instruction that uses both words and pictures (multimedia) to promote second language learning and academic content learning (instructional message).

As is known, principals and other educational leaders who focus their efforts on instructional leadership practices have a greater influence on student achievement outcomes (Hattie, 2009). Possessing research- and theory-based knowledge of EB instruction and leading teachers in deepening their own knowledge to inform EB instruction has been associated with positive EB student outcomes (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2018; Theoharis & O'Toole, 2011; Wiemelt & Welton, 2015). To strengthen teaching and learning in dual language programs, specifically, and in second language learning settings generally, it is advantageous for educational leaders tasked with supporting EBs' academic development to understand the science of learning principles informing the design of multimedia instruction to ensure EBs are presented with intentionally-designed instructional content that results in deeper learning. We begin our discussion by establishing the connection between EB instructional leadership practices and EB academic outcomes by providing a brief overview of EB instructional leadership. Then, we provide background on dual language instruction and instructional inputs for second language learning. Next, we present a brief discussion of CTML and its relationship to cognitive load theory, followed by the SOL principles we focus on for this discussion. We conclude with examples of instructional content designed using SOL principles and implications for EB instructional leadership practices.

### **Instructional Leadership for Emergent Bilinguals**

Traditionally an underserved group, EBs experience reduced academic outcomes and opportunities when compared to non-EBs (Gándara & Mordechay, 2017). To shift this academic narrative, researchers analyzed leadership practices impacting EB success, particularly those related to school leaders' EB instructional leadership (Clark & Chrispeels, 2022; Theoharis & O'Toole, 2011; DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2020; Scanlan & López, 2012). Findings suggested that EB instructional leadership includes possessing curricular and instructional knowledge and having the ability to engage in data analysis related to EBs (Clark & Chrispeels, 2022). A salient aspect of EB instructional leadership is teachers' perception of principals' ability to support them in

developing their EB instructional expertise and guiding the work of professional learning communities (Clark & Chrispeels, 2022). For example, in a case study of a principal's EB instructional leadership practices, DeMatthews and Izquierdo (2020) found that principal supports in developing teachers' EB instructional expertise included conducting classroom observations, engaging in data analysis with teachers, participating in lesson planning, providing professional learning, and individualizing further supports based on teachers' specific needs.

To support EB teaching and learning effectively as the literature suggests, educational leaders benefit from deeper understandings of EB pedagogy and second language acquisition models as they lead in schools (Scanlan & López, 2012). The literature highlights features of educational leadership preparation programs that engage aspiring educational leaders in analysis of EB-related issues in schools (Trujillo & Cooper, 2014). It is unclear, however, the extent to which educational leaders have opportunities to develop EB pedagogical expertise prior to entering a leadership position. Therefore, continued development of educational leaders' EB pedagogical expertise is critical as Vera and colleagues (2022) uncovered. Through an EB professional learning needs assessment administered to teachers and educational leaders, Vera et al. found that educational leaders perceived various EB professional learning needs, including the use of evidence-based EB instructional strategies and materials. Following the needs assessment, professional learning was provided where EB instructional strategies were integrated and modeled throughout the sessions (Vera et al., 2022). Participants indicated that the professional learning was beneficial in helping them to foster "interactive, language-rich learning environments" (Vera et al., 2022, p. 104).

### **Dual Language Instruction**

As noted by Scanlan and López (2012), educational leaders promote positive EB outcomes as they select and implement second language acquisition models and advance linguistically responsive teaching in schools. Longitudinal research conducted by Collier and Thomas (2017) has shown that all student groups enrolled in dual language programs achieve at higher levels on state and national assessments than their peers in other program types. EBs, in particular, benefit from dual language instruction, as evidenced by longitudinal achievement gap closure data that show the substantial difference between EB and non-EB performance in third grade is eliminated by seventh grade, with EBs reaching grade-level achievement (Thomas & Collier, 2012).

In addition to promoting higher academic achievement on state and national tests, dual language programs offer the valuable benefit of developing bilingualism and biliteracy. Collier and Thomas (2017) noted that proficient bilinguals have higher creativity, problem solving, metalinguistic awareness, and executive function skills, among other attributes. Dual language programs are a type of bilingual education that uses two languages for instruction, English and a partner language. Some dual language models, known as Developmental Bilingual Education (Hamayan et al., 2013), are designed primarily for emergent bilinguals to develop their home language proficiency while developing proficiency in English. Other models, known as Two-Way Immersion, enroll students who are proficient in English and not in the partner language as well as emergent bilinguals who are proficient in the partner language and are acquiring English as a new language. These two-way models typically divide instructional time into varying proportions of English and the partner language, with 50/50 being a common distribution for all grade levels.

Other models gradually reach the 50/50 split, beginning with 90 percent partner language and 10 percent English in kindergarten, 80/20 in first, 70/30 in second, 60/40 in third, and 50/50 in fourth and beyond (Hamayan et al., 2013). We will now look more closely at dual language program classroom practices that support EB achievement, examining the role of instructional input and the SOL principles that can inform its use.

### **Instructional Input**

Instructional materials can be viewed as a type of input according to second language acquisition theory. The role of input has been studied for decades and has been determined to be an important factor in learning a second language (Ellis, 2008). More specifically, noted scholar Stephen Krashen (1985) posited that second language input must be comprehensible to be learned. When EBs are exposed to words, phrases, or sentences that use language they are not familiar with, the language must be accompanied by extralinguistic cues such as images, real objects, and movement/gestures (multimedia) to convey the meaning, which makes the unfamiliar language comprehensible, and hence, learnable.

Input is one of three elements that are necessary for learning second languages. Interaction between emergent bilinguals, and between emergent bilinguals and proficient speakers, has been a major subject of current research (Mitchell et al., 2019), and the linguistic output that learners produce has been shown to be crucial for developing proficiency (Swain, 2005). Nonetheless, input continues to be a recognized element known to be necessary for acquiring a second language and thus merits continued examination and application in the field. Clearly, multimedia instruction can provide these essential extralinguistic cues more readily than printed text alone. To be effective, however, careful attention needs to be given to the design of multimedia instruction so that it attends to cognitive load theory, which informs how learners process new knowledge.

### **Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning and the Science of Learning Principles**

As learners acquire new knowledge and transfer it to long-term memory, they experience cognitive loads due to limits on working memory and amounts of information that can be processed (see Sweller, 2020; Sweller et al., 2019). To facilitate learning, cognitive loads can be managed through instructional designs that reduce non-essential information or tasks (i.e., extraneous load) and support “cognitive structures and processes” related to the intended learning (i.e., germane load; Van Merriënboer et al., 2006, p. 344). Mayer’s (2014) cognitive theory of multimedia learning (CTML) addresses cognitive loads by considering the role of working memory and long-term memory in the processing of multimedia instructional messages. CTML posits that to process information, learners use two channels (i.e., visual/pictorial and verbal/auditory) with both channels limited in their processing capacity (Mayer, 2014). To gain new knowledge efficiently from multimedia instruction, a distinct set of processes must take place as information is acquired through the two channels, processed through working memory, combined with prior knowledge from long-term memory, and added to long-term memory for later retrieval (Mayer, 2008, Figure 2). The processes support learners by (a) reducing extraneous

processing, (b) managing essential processing, and (c) fostering generative processing (Mayer, 2008).

By reducing extraneous processing in the instructional design process, learners are able to use their cognitive capacity to focus on essential new information to construct a “cognitive representation” (Mayer, 2008, p. 763). When managing essential processing is applied, learners are supported as they process complex information to build a cognitive representation (Mayer, 2008). To foster generative processing, learners must utilize their cognitive capacity to interpret information presented to create cognitive representations (Mayer, 2008, 2017).

To engage in these processes to facilitate and deepen learning, Mayer (2008) outlined ten evidence-based science of learning principles (SOL) that should be incorporated into the multimedia instructional design. Of the ten SOL principles, we focus on six because they directly support EBs’ second language learning. Reducing EBs’ extraneous processing, managing EBs’ essential processing, and fostering EBs’ generative processing are particularly relevant to dual language instruction because EBs are developing oral language proficiency and literacy in a language through which they are also learning new content. In the sections that follow, we describe the SOL principles we focus on for this discussion.

### **Coherence, Signaling, Spatial Contiguity, and Temporal Contiguity Principles**

Coherence, signaling, spatial contiguity, and temporal contiguity are SOL principles intended to reduce extraneous processing (Mayer, 2008). For new information presented to be *coherent*, extraneous information should be eliminated or reduced (Mayer, 2008). In other words, instructional content should be designed so that it includes only essential information aligned to the learning intention. Schweppe and Rummer (2014) argued that non-essential, high interest information or what they termed as the “seductive details effect” (p. 298), interferes with learners’ capacity to process information, particularly for learners with less prior knowledge. Therefore, when the coherence principle is not applied, learners have difficulty distinguishing between essential and non-essential information. In a study on the coherence principle, Jiang et al. (2017) analyzed teacher and student perceptions of the prevalence of the coherence principle in English as a foreign language (EFL) coursework. The researchers found that students perceived that the coherence principle was not fully addressed, and that the reduced coherence detracted from their learning. Teachers, on the other hand, perceived that the coherence principle was present in EFL coursework (Jiang et al., 2017), pointing to a mismatch in perceptions of coursework design.

While coherence focuses on reducing non-essential information, the *signaling* principle underscores the importance of highlighting important information for learners (Mayer, 2008). Signaling critical information can occur through labeling, color coding, or by providing summary information to communicate essential information to the learner. Studies on the signaling principle revealed increased learning outcomes for learners provided with multimedia that incorporated signaling (i.e., illustrations with labeled text) when compared to learners provided with multimedia that did not apply the signaling principle (Jian, 2019; Lin et al., 2017; Mason et al., 2013). Findings indicated that when the signaling principle was present, learners spent time reading labeled text and studying the illustrations (Mason et al., 2013), resulting in improved learning outcomes.

In addition to signaling, spatial contiguity is also necessary to reduce extraneous processing. The spatial contiguity principle refers to the placement of printed words next to pictures or graphics (Mayer, 2008). When pictures or graphics are presented, corresponding text should be integrated (i.e., in close proximity) with the pictures or graphics instead of separated (i.e., placed far from) pictures or graphics (Mayer, 2017). Schroeder and Cenkcí's (2018) meta-analysis of 36 studies found that instructional designs with spatial contiguity increased learning outcomes. Further, individual studies found that integrated examples using spatial contiguity supported learning outcomes in mathematics lessons (Tindall-Ford et al., 2015) and science lessons (Schlag & Ploetzner, 2011). In a study of learners' perception of Japanese language learning and spatial contiguity, participants indicated that the placement of corresponding words and pictures facilitated their learning because spatial contiguity led to quicker comprehension of written text (Ayub et al., 2017).

Finally, the temporal contiguity principle refers to concurrent narration and animation. Spoken words related to pictures, graphics, or animation presented should be presented simultaneously rather than presented separately (Mayer, 2008). In a study on temporal contiguity and split-attention effects on learning a computer programming language, findings suggested that the simultaneous presentation of lecture notes, a worked example, and explanations from the instructor facilitated learners' understanding of the programming language based on the results of pre- and post-tests (Chang et al., 2011). Focusing on temporal contiguity, but with an emphasis on student perceptions using a cognitive load pre- and post-test, Cheng et al. (2015) found that students who received instruction attending to temporal contiguity reported a lower perception of cognitive load. In terms of learners' affect, Park (2015) found that presenting spoken words coupled with an image contributed to learners' self-perceptions of confidence (i.e., belief that one could be successful in learning) and relevance (i.e., belief that one's needs as a learner are met), which strengthened learners' motivation.

### **Pretraining Principle**

Pretraining supports learners in managing essential processing (Mayer, 2008), particularly when the essential information presented is so complex that it may overload learners' cognitive capacity (Mayer, 2017). The pretraining principle sets forth that learners should be presented with background information on the upcoming lesson (i.e., vocabulary, concepts, etc.) because learners acquire complex information more readily when they have prior knowledge (Mayer, 2008, 2017). In short, for deep learning to occur learners must be able to make connections between new information being presented and their prior knowledge (Mayer, 2008; Wittrock, 1974, 2010).

Because prior knowledge is critical to learning, it is necessary for learners to "receive pretraining that activates or provides relevant prior knowledge" (Moreno & Mayer, 2007, p. 320). Pretraining is particularly impactful for learners who possess minimal or no knowledge on the topic presented (Renkl et al., 2009). Studies on the learning effects of the pretraining principle demonstrated increased learning outcomes (Bos et al., 2009; Gegner et al., 2009; Kennedy et al., 2014). For instance, Gegner et al. (2009) found that use of the pretraining principle supported learners' comprehension of scientific text and promoted "positive beliefs" related to reading scientific text (p. 94). Bos et al. (2009) also found that pretraining supported increased learning

outcomes when coupled with a pre-test, presentation of information, opportunities for learners to ask questions, and provision of feedback.

### **Multimedia Principle**

Multimedia fosters generative processing, where learners use their cognitive capacity to create cognitive representation, resulting in deeper learning (Mayer, 2008, 2017). Presenting learners with both words and pictures instead of only words supports increased learning outcomes (Mayer, 2008). To support deeper learning, graphics or pictures utilized should be instructionally relevant to the learning at hand and not simply high interest (Sung & Mayer, 2012). Studies on the multimedia principle have demonstrated improved learning outcomes in post-tests for learners (Frumusela et al., 2015; Issa et al., 2013). For example, Herrlinger et al. (2017) found that learning improved when learners were presented with a biology text that used both words and pictures, particularly when words were delivered orally.

### **Applying Science of Learning Principles to Instruction for Emergent Bilinguals**

Given the preponderance of evidence supporting enhanced learning as a result of the application of SOL principles, our selected SOL principles have a heightened importance for EBs. As educational leaders implement EB instructional leadership practices to develop teachers' EB instructional expertise, SOL principles should be discussed, emphasized, and applied as evidence-based practice for the design of multimedia instruction in schools. As noted in the literature (Vera et al., 2022), educational leaders may gain from models of the SOL principles in practice to support development of teachers' expertise. Therefore, in this section we present an example of multimedia instructional materials that demonstrates selected SOL principles discussed previously, sequenced according to how they may be applied to the design of a multimedia lesson. Because it can be inferred that those reading this article are proficient in English, we use Italian language examples so the reader will experience them as an EB might experience a similar example in English. We assume most of this article's readers are not proficient in Italian and, therefore, this Italian example may assist readers in gaining first-hand knowledge of how the application of the selected SOL principles supports second language learning.

### **Italian Text Example**

This experiential second language reading example requires you to read through the following two-paragraph passage from an Italian fifth grade social studies textbook (Figure 1), noting any information that you are able to comprehend without referring to outside sources (such as Google). As you read, jot down in English anything you are able to comprehend in the Italian text.

### **Figure 1**

#### *Information Presented Only through Text*

Cinque secoli fa arrivò a Gubbio un certo Giorgio Andreoli, lombardo, che cominciò a fabbricare ceramiche. Erano piatti e vasi ai quali, mediante una sua lavorazione segreta, egli
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riusciva a dare meravigliosi riflessi dei colori dell'arcobaleno. Erano tanto belli che alcuni di questi pezzi sono oggi conservati nei più importanti musei del mondo.

Si dice che Mastro Giorgio non svelasse mai a nessuno il suo segreto, ma da lui i ceramisti di Gubbio qualche cosa devono aver imparato, se ormai da cinque secoli producono ceramiche di squisita fattura; e in particolare (con una tecnica scoperta mezzo secolo fa) quei vasi neri e lucidi chiamati búccheri, che ripetono le forme e i fregi degli antichissimi modelli originali etruschi.

*Note.* This passage could be read silently or listened to while an Italian speaker reads it aloud.

### ***Discussion of Italian Text Elements***

As you read the passage in Figure 1, there was much non-essential information that had to be sifted through to gain understanding of key points through finding recognizable cognates (words that look or sound similar in two languages and have the same meaning in both) that you could decode to make sense of the passage. As Cummins (2021) has shown, when EBs are presented with new information verbally and without the context of extralinguistic cues (e.g., pictures) not only do they struggle to understand and learn the new information, they also are deprived of an opportunity to learn new language associated with it.

### **Italian Multimedia Instruction Example**

In contrast to this purely verbal, non-multimedia approach to conveying the lesson objective, we can examine the effectiveness of conveying the content of this lesson through multimedia instruction that follows the selected SOL principles. The following multimedia display of key terms and corresponding images (Figures 2 and 3) unlocks essential meaning from the text through reducing extraneous processing, managing essential processing, and fostering generative processing. This is accomplished by (a) building prior knowledge, (b) limiting the amount of text to key terms, (c) using words and pictures, (d) placing printed words next to pictures, and (e) highlighting key terms, following the principles of *pretraining*, *coherence*, *multimedia*, *spatial contiguity*, and *signaling* to help EBs construct cognitive representations. Additionally, when presented as a recorded, narrated slide presentation or live by an instructor, as key terms and corresponding images are presented to EBs, spoken words are also used, following the principle of *temporal contiguity*. While these processes promote general learning, when considering the language aspects of learning any concept for EBs, these principles are especially critical. We apply these principles in Figure 2, which is divided into three slides and Figure 3, which presents one slide. As with the text example, read through each slide, noting what you understand from the multimedia presentation of the essential information from the written text in Figure 1.

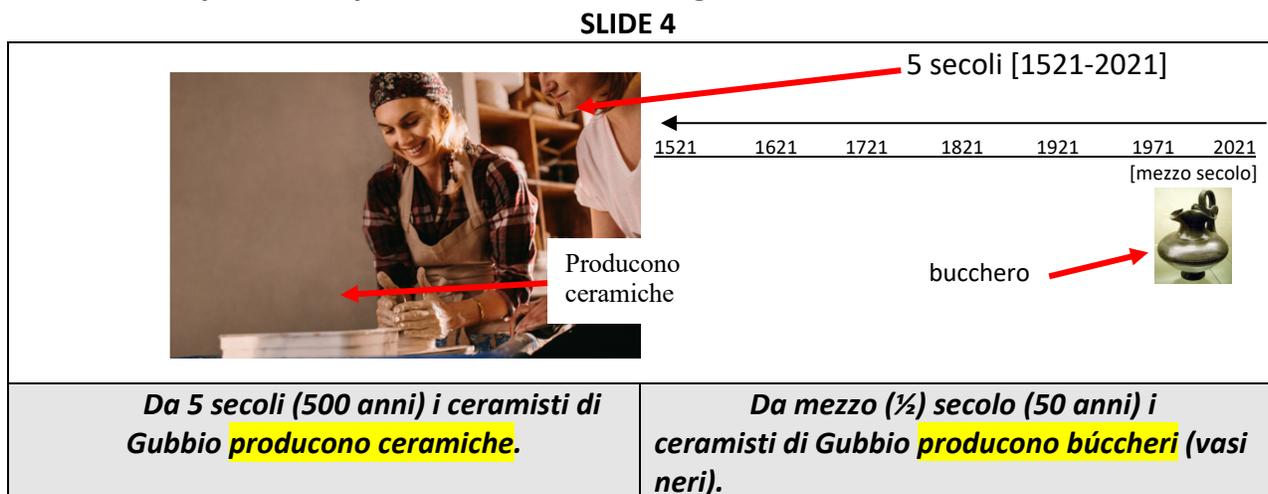


the map. Thus, the SOL principles of coherence (presenting essential information), multimedia (words and pictures presented simultaneously), and signaling (highlighting information) are applied. The row of text underneath the labeled images in Slide 1 states, “Five centuries ago, in Gubbio...”

In Slide 2, the painting on the left identifies a historical figure, while the photo on the right depicts pottery making. The row of text below the images continues, “Giorgio Andreoli made ceramics (plates and vases).” To convey the type of pottery, Slide 3 shows plates and vases of different colors, with the words “plates of all colors and vases of all colors” in the row below. In addition to the coherence and multimedia principles presented in Slide 3, the spatial contiguity is applied, clearly marking each illustration with a word or sentence label that describes it. Figure 3 presents Slide 4, with more complex information. Again, note what you understand from the multimedia presentation of the essential information from the written text in Figure 1.

**Figure 3**

*Slide 4: Main Information of the Text Presented through Multimedia*



Slide 4 shows an image of pottery making indicating the action (producing ceramics) and the time span (1520-2021). It also shows the timeline presented previously in Slide 1 but now focusing on a recent timeframe, 1971-2021 [half century] next to a photo of a unique type of vase, a “bucchero,” that began to be produced 50 years ago. In Slide 4 linguistic complexity is increased gradually by presenting short sentences and corresponding images. Pretraining now starts to move beyond just key terms to include sentences. Slide 4 uses signaling, spatial contiguity and multimedia to support EBs as they process sentences in Italian. Signaling is used with a key term or phrase (producono) and corresponding picture. Underneath Slide 4 there are two sentences, which read “For five centuries the pottery makers of Gubbio have produced ceramics. For a half (1/2) century (50 years), the pottery makers of Gubbio produce buccheri (black vases). These sentences contain the key word or phrase and are signaled as well through highlighting. Slide 4 uses multimedia and spatial contiguity principles to assist EBs in gleaning the historical event presented in the sentence. The visuals of the vase and timeline and corresponding words and the signaling used in the sentence support EBs in the processing of the sentence found in the figure.

To summarize, from the information that was extracted from the text (Figure 1) and which thereby reduced extraneous information and simplified complex language, the multimedia presentation (Figures 2 and 3) provided images, diagrams, and labeling to communicate the main information from the original text. Putting together the text beneath each of the four slides, we have the following translated summary: “Five centuries ago, in Gubbio, Giorgio Andreoli, made ceramics (plates and vases), plates of all colors and vases of all colors. For five centuries (500 years) the pottery makers of Gubbio have produced ceramics. For a half (1/2) century (50 years) the pottery makers of Gubbio produce *búcheri* (black vases).” The multimedia examples in the preceding figures demonstrate that the main points of the text are comprehensible through the reduction of extraneous details in the text and the inclusion of illustrations for each point. Providing the multimedia summary of main points not only reduces the cognitive load on working memory required to comprehend the content of instruction, but it also promotes learning the language associated with it.

Returning to the original text presented in Figure 1, we can see how the application of the six SOL principles in Figures 2 and 3 supported EBs. Through this multimedia instructional presentation, EBs were provided with Italian language inputs coupled with extralinguistic clues that helped them home in on the essential information describing the history of artisanal practices, attend to the complex information presented, and build a cognitive representation of Italian artisanal practices. Depending on EBs’ language acquisition level, the multimedia presentation could be used in place of the original text for beginning level EBs, while more advanced EBs could be presented with the original passage following the multimedia presentation. In either case, the use of coherence, signaling, spatial contiguity, multimedia, and pretraining principles facilitates EBs’ unlocking of the Italian language and the social studies lesson objective.

### **Conclusion**

For this discussion, we intentionally presented a simple slideshow example, which we envisioned could be used with print and/or digital multimedia content. This was intended as an entry point for educational leaders to consider the use of SOL principles in the design of EB instructional content as they implement EB instructional leadership practices to advance EB outcomes. Educational leaders are key to developing teachers’ EB expertise through various instructional leadership practices (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2020; Clark & Chrispeels, 2022). To lead EB learning effectively, educational leaders need models of effective EB pedagogy in practice (Vera et al., 2022), like the one presented here. SOL principles and their application are vital to dual language instruction so that EBs can develop second language proficiency and are able to access new learning simultaneously. Furthermore, as schools and school districts acquire more sophisticated digital multimedia instructional materials/tools for EBs’ second language learning, it is critical that educational leaders tasked with selecting and creating instructional materials have set criteria to ensure that digital materials align to SOL principles (see Li & Lan, 2021 for more information). Likewise, educational leaders responsible for supporting and evaluating EBs’ teaching and learning also benefit from understanding the SOL principles and their application in multimedia instruction (print or digital), so they can guide dual language teachers and other teachers of EBs to advance students’ academic outcomes. Ultimately, when SOL principles are

applied to multimedia instructional materials (i.e., materials that include words and pictures) for second language learning, effective inputs can be achieved, resulting in continued EB achievement.

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# Secondary Level Literacy Coaches' and Content-area Teachers' Relationships as an Avenue for School Improvement

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*The purpose of this paper is to report on a qualitative study that examined secondary level literacy coaches' and secondary teachers' relationships in one educational region of a U.S. northeast state. This study employed a phenomenological approach. Data was collected in two phases. In Phase 1, the researcher interviewed five literacy coaches about their role as a coach. In Phase II, the researcher interviewed nine teachers to understand their perceptions of the coaching experience. Findings from the study show three interconnected themes. First, literacy coaching in the secondary setting is notably more complex than the elementary school level. Second, role ambiguity complicates the teacher-coach relationship. Third, lack of job clarification requires the literacy coach to define their position through relationship building. Implications for school administrators concern the importance of clarification and collaboration with teachers and coaches in implementing a coaching model. This study contributes to the current lack of evidence-based research on the secondary teacher-literacy coach relationship and how school administrators can better support the literacy coaching model.*

**Keywords:** Literacy coach, Secondary education, role ambiguity, coaching model

In United States public high schools, 85% of students graduate in four years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), in 2019, only 34% of eighth grade students performed at or above the proficiency level in reading (2020). These statistics indicate the need for school leaders to recognize the importance of literacy instruction at the secondary level. Specifically, students in high school must possess reading skills demanded by increasingly complex content area courses (Biancarosa et al., 2010; Joftus, 2002; Joftus & Maddox-Dolan, 2003). With limited teacher preparation, dwindling resources, and high-stakes testing, U.S. educational leaders are left with complicated questions within a complicated system.

How do secondary educators assess and teach reading skills to high school students? Benjamin (2013) outlined the dilemma faced by teachers in the secondary setting where many content area teachers do not view themselves as reading teachers. High school teachers divulge that students have difficulty decoding and comprehending academic texts, but teachers do not know how to solve the problem (Schoenbach et al., 1999). According to Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, and Hurwitz (1999), secondary teachers express feeling pressure to cover the curriculum and content of their discipline. Unprepared to give reading support, many secondary teachers find themselves teaching “around reading” (p. 4). Secondary teachers are aware of students’ inability to understand written information, yet there remains a lack of professional development to help teachers learn how to teach students high-level vocabulary and comprehension. Thus, content area teachers are often isolated in their efforts to deliver instruction effectively to below grade level readers (Benjamin, 2007; Schoenbach et al., 1999). Literacy coaching emerged to fill an instructional gap.

The focus of this paper is on secondary literacy coaches’ and secondary teachers’ relationships, and how relationships inform the coaching construct at the secondary level. According to Fullan and Quin (2016), human capital within a school remains a key driver to organizational coherence, and creating a cohesive school with a collaborative culture is a requirement for school improvement. To improve schools, administrators need to understand the complexity of literacy coaching, and ways school leadership can support coaching as an embedded part of instruction (Selvaggi, 2016).

## Literature

Following is a review of the literature on literacy coaching as it intersects in three domains: secondary content areas, administrative challenges, and teacher relationships.

### Literacy Coaching in Secondary Content Areas

Literacy coaches support content area teachers. The purpose of literacy coaching is to expand teachers’ knowledge and expertise in literacy instruction and, in turn increase student achievement. Sandvold and Baxter (2008) identified over 100 different instructional methods used by classroom teachers. Teachers reported lacking sufficient guidance and support in choosing the best instructional method, and specifically identified a need for professional development in teaching reading. According to Sandvold and Baxter (2008), literacy coaching

provides scaffolding and continuous support for teachers that other modes of professional development do not.

The International Literacy Association (International Reading Association, 2006) defines content area literacy coaches as “skilled collaborators who function effectively in middle and high school settings” (p. 5). Districts employ literacy coaches to support the district’s professional development program, and provide an expanded aspect to traditional teacher learning. According to Jay and Strong (2008), utilizing literacy coaches in professional development programs provides concentrated focus and support to classroom teachers.

According to Kamil (2003), as students matriculate through the PK-12 school system, the complexity and content shifts from reading acquisition skills, taught through fictional texts, to expository and content-focused reading. Additionally, secondary students are typically no longer instructed in cognitive processes. The metacognitive modeling, evidenced in think-alouds and teacher modeling, is less prevalent in high school than it is in elementary school classrooms (Kamil, 2003). Approximately 8.7 million, fourth through twelfth grade students struggle with required reading and writing tasks (Kamil, 2003). Secondary teachers find it challenging not only to engage students with reading but also ensure students have the required literacy skills to succeed in other content areas (Fisher & Frey, 2008)

According to Strickland and Alvermann (2004), what teachers teach, and the time allotted for each topic and skill, accounts for the greatest amount of variance in student achievement. The increased pressure of state standards and high-stakes testing contributes to the demand placed on secondary teachers. In order to share the responsibility for literacy instruction, teachers should collaborate within their content-area departments and grade levels (Strickland & Alvermann, 2004).

Content area literacy instruction is important (Fisher & Frey, 2008). Literacy coaching is an often cited staff development model in public schools (Hasbrouck & Denton, 2007; Manzo et al., 2005). Data suggest that content area teachers know relatively little about effective instructional reading practices (Fisher & Frey, 2008) and minimal preparation as to how to directly instruct students who struggle with complex literacy tasks (Schoenbach et al., 1999). According to Strickland and Alvermann (2004), content area teachers also lack resources to support struggling students in highly academic, subject-specific writing. Although literacy coaching is often included in a school district’s action plan, there is little research to provide a basis for decisions that prove its effectiveness. (Strickland & Alvermann, 2004)

### **Literacy Coaching and Administrative Challenges**

One challenge faced by school administrators is proving the efficacy and outcomes of coaching models. Many coaching models have not been implemented long enough to gather sufficient data to assess effectiveness. According to Kannapel (2008), it may take several years of observation to measure the degree of impact on student achievement. With finite budgets, and limited staffing positions, school administrators must be clear on the role and responsibilities of the literacy coach (Kannapel, 2008).

According to Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, and Rodriguez (2005), perceptions of the literacy coaches’ role can be misinterpreted by a school’s staff. Even though the concept of a literacy coach is often viewed as a position of leadership, it may not be the reality. Literacy coaches are

often former reading teachers with dedicated pedagogical experience. However, it is unclear if the step to literacy coaching is a step-up or a step sideways (Hunt & Handsfield, 2013). The perceived position of power is further complicated when the literacy coaches' role and use of time is not defined by school leaders. Although it is recommended that a literacy coaches' role be clear and extensively outlined, coaches spend a significant amount of time creating their place within the school culture. In turn, perceptions of the position, instead of valid and reliable measures of effectiveness, are used for evaluation. Thus, a lack of data may hinder sustainability of the position (Taylor et al., 2005).

Outcomes of successful coaching are linked to supportive administrative leadership (Selvaggi, 2016). According to Taylor, Zugelder and Bowman (2013), the school principal is the most influential person to the literacy coaches' success. Interactions between the principal and teachers, in reference to coaching, can positively or negatively affect a teacher's perceptions and acceptance of the literacy coach. Wilder (2014) suggests that if the roles and responsibilities of the secondary literacy coach are not clarified by school leadership, the coaching role might cease to exist.

### **Literacy Coaching and Teacher Relationships**

Miller and Stewart (2013) proposed three tenets required for districts to implement successful team coaching. One, establish a thorough understanding of the coaches' role to all stakeholders. Two, identify specific qualifications of the coach. Three, present the coach in a non-evaluative, supportive role versus a position of administrative power. Neutrality empowers teachers and provides professional space for teachers to self-direct their professional development with the coach (Miller & Stewart, 2013).

The International Literacy Association (ILA) provides a guide for a literacy coaches' job description (2010; 2018). According to the ILA, a literacy coach should model instruction, facilitate professional development, initiate the development of literacy plans, and/or act as a non-evaluative liaison between teachers and administrators. Literacy coach job postings often list a range of requirements from a teaching degree, required years of teaching experience, a reading specialist certification, or additional educational training. An individual with knowledge of research-based, literacy instruction and leadership experience is the best fit (International Literacy Association, 2010; 2018).

In addition to professional experience, literacy coaches must possess tacit skills in communication and culture navigating to both build or mitigate teacher perceptions (Dugan, 2010). Hull (2011) investigated the perceptions of teachers and principals regarding the role of a literacy coach. The ability to communicate and listen were two of the 14 categories that emerged as the most positive coaching attributes. Pletcher (2013) suggests literacy coaches are most successful when they are approachable and they, as well as others, understand the literacy coaches' role.

According to Smith (2012), coaches initiate a connection with content area teachers through their service as curriculum resources and establish relationships with teachers through conversation and feedback. This interaction of relationship building validates the coach's pedagogical knowledge. Thus, if teachers experience a collaborative relationship with the coach,

they perceive a greater degree of coaching expertise. Coaches reported this collaborative relationship vital in their responsibility to mentor teachers (Smith, 2012).

The position of a literacy coach is complex because the process involves teacher change (Leent & Exley, 2013; Shaw, 2007; Smith, 2012). A literacy coach is, by definition, a colleague. Yet many teachers could perceive a literacy coach as a person with authority. Depending upon the context of the coaching situation, and if the integration of a literacy coach was a grass roots initiative versus an administrative mandate, the outcome of the literacy coaches' effectiveness might be impacted. Thus, it is important that principals and coaches stress the non-evaluative nature of the coaching phenomenon (Coburn, 2005; Pomerantz & Pierce, 2013).

As most literacy coaches were former teachers or reading specialists, role confusion exists. Without clear definitions by school administrators, the role of the literacy coach shifts within teacher perceptions. For example, Stevens (2011) reported that although the literacy coach is the coaching expert, without school leadership's clarification of the literacy coaches' role, the literacy coach is viewed and utilized as a reading specialist. Rather than coaching teachers or implementing professional development, the literacy coach provides services similar to a remedial reading teacher. To add to the confusion, literacy coaches are left to define their role organically, building relationships with teachers one-at-a-time that allow the coach to perform as a coach and share expertise (Stevens, 2011). Thus, for literacy coaching to be a tool for school improvement, it is important to investigate the relationship between teachers and coaches (Hunt & Handsfield, 2013).

## Methodology

The purpose of the study was to investigate secondary literacy coaches' and secondary teachers' relationships in one educational region of a U.S. northeast state. The primary research question was:

- How do secondary literacy coaches and secondary teachers perceive the teacher-coach relationship?

This study employed a phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994) and sought to describe the lived experiences of literacy coaches in what Moustakas refers to as "textual" and "structural" (p. 118) descriptions of the experience. The state for this study has 29 educational service units that provide teacher and operational support to the state's 500 school districts. Data was collected from teachers and literacy coaches within two educational service units. The researcher was employed as a reading specialist, giving direct student support, in the same state as the study. They were not employed as a literacy coach or in either of the educational service units used in this study.

Participants were selected and interviewed in two phases. In Phase 1, the researcher used public district information to directly contact literacy coaches working in the secondary setting. Five literacy coaches agreed to participate in a one-hour interview about their role as a coach. After the interview, the researcher asked for contact information of teachers with whom the literacy coach had worked. In Phase II, the researcher interviewed nine teachers to understand their perceptions of the coaching experience. All interviews were completed in-person.

Seidman (2005) advocates structuring interviews in a way that connects data collection with data analysis. To ensure a holistic exploration of the phenomenon, interviews included

open-ended questions that allowed participants to describe their experiences and perceptions. Although primary research questions guided the interview as the interview unfolded, participants were asked follow-up questions to clarify, or further explain, their response. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and sent to each participant for member checking (Creswell, 2013). The researcher also took notes and recorded anecdotal information along with participants' answers

For purposes of this study, secondary teachers were defined as any teacher working in a middle or high school that taught a dedicated discipline such as English, Math, Science or Social Studies. A literacy coach was defined as any person in the formal role of "coach" and someone who specifically offered teacher coaching versus direct student support. To protect participant identity, participant information was deidentified and pseudonyms assigned. Table 1 lists the literacy coach, and the number of years each coach spent as a certified teacher and a literacy coach. Table 2 lists teacher participants, years as a certified teacher, years in current position, and content area taught.

**Table 1**  
*Literacy Coach Participants*

Participant Pseudonym	Years as a Certified Teacher	Years as a Literacy Coach
Ali	13	3
Annie	18	7
Brian	21	6
Gayle	13	8
Colleen	11	6

**Table 2**  
*Teacher Participants*

Participant Pseudonym	Years as a Certified Teacher	Years in Current Position	Content Area
Brady	14	14	Language Arts
Catherine	27	13	Language Arts
Dorey	10	10	English
Ellen	14	14	Math
Francis	17	17	Math
Hannah	4	4	Language Arts
Harper	7	7	Language Arts
Isaac	33	33	Social Studies
Ivy	26	26	Spanish

### Data Analysis

Data included 14 hours of recorded interviews, 126 pages of transcripts, and 10 pages of memos and anecdotal notes. Data was analyzed by a modification of the van Kaam (1966, as cited in

Moustakas, 1994, pp. 120-121) method of data analysis. Each transcript was hand-coded via horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994) and grouping of phrases relevant to the coaching experience. Phrases were then sorted and labelled. Labelled data was clustered into three interconnected themes.

- 1) Literacy coaching in the secondary setting is notably more complex than the elementary school level, with a greater focus on content area subjects.
- 2) Role ambiguity complicates the teacher-coach relationship.
- 3) Without administrative clarification, the literacy coach must build relationships with teachers to implement the coaching role

In qualitative research, validity begins at the study's inception (Morse et al., 2002; Richards & Morse, 2012). Thus, the researcher implemented bracketing and reflexivity (Moustakas, 1994) throughout data collection and analysis. Findings were also checked against interview data and field notes for accuracy (Creswell, 2013; Morse et al., 2002).

## **Findings**

### **Complexities of Literacy Coaching in the Secondary Setting**

The *Standards for Middle and High School Secondary Coaches* (International Reading Association, 2006; International Literacy Association, 2010) propose that literacy coaching in the primary grades requires the coach to have a different skill set than middle and high school grades. Stevens (2011) agrees that the instructional responsibilities of a high school literacy coach cannot be compared to an elementary school literacy coach. As one literacy coach summarized, "It's harder the higher you go."

#### ***Focus on Subject Area Discipline***

Throughout the interviews for this study, participants mentioned facets of the secondary setting that contrasted with elementary school. Dorey, a high school English teacher, emphasized her focus on her discipline. She said "there is more of a focus, whereas in elementary school, you have more of a broad sense of what a literacy coach does because there is so much."

Catherine, a middle school English teacher, who previously taught in elementary school, described the difference. She said that in elementary school the literacy coach was "pulling out small groups [of students] into her little closet and providing those interventions, and I could see her sending books home with kids." Catherine continued, "she was very present with the students and those kids who really need the support."

Catherine contrasted her memory of the elementary school literacy coach with the literacy coach in her middle school.

Here in the middle school, it's different. I don't know what [the literacy coach] does exactly. I know she's doing something. She's not coming into the classroom and saying I need to take this group of kids to go do this intervention. I see her as more of a teacher support.

#### ***Fitting Coaching into Subject Area Teaching***

According to participants in this study, the integration of reading strategies across the curriculum was sometimes met with resistance. Isaac, a middle school social studies teacher stated, “I’ve always looked at it like, I’m a history teacher, not a reading teacher.” Brady, a secondary language arts teacher reported, “We definitely need more professional development in those core content areas.” She also stated that without the guidance and support of a literacy coach, the delivery becomes inconsistent and ineffective. She continued, “we really want our coaches in [our] classroom. You know, doing job embedded professional development.”

The majority of the teachers interviewed were in favor of using a literacy coach, even if they did not fully understand the coach’s role. As Ellen, a math teacher said

I didn’t really know of that resource [a literacy coach] for the first couple years I was in the middle school setting. [The literacy coach] helped me look at things in a very different way and really helped break it down into how the kids could make more sense of it. She came up with several ways of focusing on math vocabulary, so the kids didn’t even realize they were, like they thought they were having fun! If there was something that I knew I would struggle with, like a concept, I would go to her and just get another view of how to present it, because her experiences are totally different than mine.

Ivy, a high school Spanish teacher, described how she learned about the literacy coach

I think we had a summer in-service that was about the Reading Apprenticeship program and I can’t remember if it was voluntary or you had to do it over the summer or do it when you got back to school. But, I took that course and that was kind of when I met [the literacy coach] to begin with. Then I learned about whole literacy, and the whole idea of coaches because that was kind of new to us.

In spite of the challenges to understanding the literacy coach position, 13 of the 14 participants interviewed responded that the literacy coaches’ role was to “support.” Brian, a literacy coach, said “There is support and there is pressure. You’re always there to support.” Congruent with literature (Shaw, 2007; Smith, 2012), other descriptive words given by the participants include “resources”, “different strategies”, “responsive”, and “listener and relationship builder.” Ali, a literacy coach, described her role as a teacher resource.

The main thing is as a resource. Someone that the teachers can go to when they have questions about content, instructional strategies, and methods. Someone who is available just to listen at times. Some teachers just need someone to listen, not always offer advice, as a sounding ground. Someone they want to just check and see, this is my idea, do you think it’s okay? Do you think I’m on the right track?

Catherine, a language arts teacher, described ways the literacy coach can function in a supportive manner, and bridge the role to administration. She said, “I think their role is staff development and it is helping to assist everybody in that building.” She mentioned the importance of being “good kid watchers” and “working with administration to help plan what staff development may be needed.” She iterated the importance of working together for students versus administrative standards and said “I think it just sets a healthy positive tone that we’re here for kids.

### **Role Ambiguity Complicates Teacher-Coach Relationship**

Of the nine teachers interviewed, none of the teachers remembered a formal introduction to the literacy coach, or an administrative explanation of the literacy coach's role. In this study, teachers reported that the literacy coach was simply part of the staff; and it was up to the teacher and literacy coach to find a way to work together. Sometimes, this was in response to a curriculum mandate unrelated to reading. Oftentimes, the support of the literacy coach was a welcome surprise. Ali, a literacy coach, describes her experience with the science department.

Science was expected from administration to use [a specific learning resource]. That was kind of a given [and] opened the door, that yes - I and those teachers, as soon as they saw what I knew, once they saw what I could do, and what I could teach them to use with the [learning resource], that it's not just cut and dry. Then we could have another conversation [about] depth of knowledge on common assessments and their concerns. That just kind of bloomed naturally.

### ***Lack of Role Clarification from Administrators***

Participants reported the role and job description of the literacy coach was developed by school district leaders. Some participants credited the superintendent, along with the elementary curriculum director, as the creators of the position. Other participants reported principals, as well as curriculum directors, teaming together to choose and implement a literacy coaching model. In this study, it was often noted by the participants that there was not a collaborative approach in defining the literacy coach position. More so, none of the participants, teachers or literacy coaches, were asked by their district administrator for input prior to the implementation of the literacy coaching position. The lack of clarity in role definition created tension between the teacher and literacy coach.

Annie, a literacy coach, provides an example from her experience the first year she, and another literacy coach, were employed.

We were just plopped in. I don't even think there was an introduction to the principals about what our job was, what our role was, and what the job requirements were. So, when we were first put in here, we were just plopped in here and we had no training as to how to be integration specialists at all. It was just go and be an integration specialist.

She described "misunderstanding from the staff" but that she understood why the staff was confused.

I totally get it and understand it. Who are these people and what is their job? Who are they? Are they a teacher or an administrator? Are they judging us? They can't evaluate us.

Annie said that her experience stemmed from the point of job creation. In her district, the job was created by central administrators, not by teachers in the building. More so, school administrators did not make clear to the teachers if Annie was a teacher or administrator. She reported that this differentiation was important, and would have helped her in negotiating her position with colleagues.

From the very beginning, there was a very big misunderstanding about what our jobs were. And shame on us for not developing something to send out to everyone, but we didn't know what we were supposed to be doing either or how that was supposed to work. We had no training.

Ali, a literacy coach, reflected on the evolution of the role of the previous literacy coach. She reported, "I took over for [previous literacy coach] who retired." She continued to describe the "morphing" of her position.

People started going to [the former literacy coach] with questions and it kind of built on its own naturally. But, they never officially said she is this role. They let her figure out what the needs were and build [the position] on her own. It was definitely self-directed for the first year or two that she did it.

The forced self-direction of the literacy coach was reflected in data from both teachers and literacy coaches. Similar to Annie, the literacy coaches were required to build their position in real-time by supporting teachers and students. Teachers were left on their own to interpret the literacy coach position. In one school district, the lack of administrative clarification resulted in elimination of the position. According to Francis, a secondary math teacher, the literacy coach model was in place for four years; but after four years, teachers felt the position was a "waste of money." She continued to describe the stress on the literacy coach.

I think that the district never gave [the literacy coach] a chance to show the value of his position, like they stretched him too thin from the start. I think, and again, I think it all boils down to the money and so that was one of the cuts that were made because I don't know that he was given a true opportunity to show how effective it could be.

### ***Literacy Coach as an Administrator***

In this study, literacy coaches, as well as teachers, reported the literacy coach being required to assume roles that did not align to the standards of the IRA (2004). For example, nearly all of the participants mentioned the literacy coach assuming an administrative role. Some literacy coaches were even directed to complete formal teacher observations. Although these reports were not tied to any disciplinary actions, participants said that it made the role of literacy coach more confusing for both the teacher and coach.

Brady, a middle school language arts teacher, explained her understanding of the literacy coaches' role. "In some districts, coaching capacities are kind of more in the administrative role, so they are able to go in and do like 'walk throughs,' that is part of their job role." She acknowledged that the coach in her school did not do observations; but, said that given the lack of clarity from administration on what the role of the coach should be, teachers could get the wrong impression. She said, "I think that kind of makes it a little bit harder for [literacy coaches]. I think some of the teachers don't have that trust built yet because I think they think [the literacy coach] is just going to go back and talk to the principal."

Isaac, a middle school social studies teacher, discussed the pseudo administrative role of the literacy coach in his building.

She is very knowledgeable, and she tends to come across like, this is what you should be doing, and she is not an administrator, but she sometimes came across like she thinks she is an administrator. That's the way people take it so that causes a lot of pushback on the part of the faculty.

Ali, a literacy coach, divulged that an administrator asked her to break confidentiality regarding a teacher's performance; but once she set a boundary with the administrator, the issue did not happen again. All five of the literacy coaches interviewed said they were required to

attend administrative meetings. However, they also reported being given directives by their administrators to act as a standardized test coordinator, sign students in or out of school, complete staff walk-through observations, and handle student discipline. Dorey, a high school English teacher described the staff's perception.

I think that put [the literacy coach] in a very delicate position because she is mandated to do these [observations] but she understands that it puts her on an, 'us versus them' sort of thing. Some people were really turned off by that.

The pseudo administrative perception of the coach by teachers made it challenging for the literacy coach to work with teachers in the classroom. As Dorey said

Like they don't want [the literacy coach] going into their classroom, like what are you looking for? It was very defensive on the educator's role and it put [the literacy coach] in an awkward position because they are not administration. They sort of were viewed as administrators because they were doing administrative things.

### **Literacy Coach Must Build Relationships to Define Position**

In this study, literacy coaches reported relationship building with teachers as the most important aspect of their job. Both teachers and literacy coaches said that the teacher-literacy coach relationship developed positively over time in response to the coaches' approach, the teacher's perception, and the mindset of both individuals. Even those who described their initial interactions as "iffy" and "challenging" said that over time, they were able to overcome barriers., Ali, a literacy coach said, "I wish somebody would have just said to me make relationship with everybody.

Embedded in relationship building was the building of trust. Every participant in the study referenced trust and rapport as parts of an effective relationship. Annie, a literacy coach said, "If they don't trust me and have a relationship with me, they will not try it in their classroom and they don't care."

However, building trust between teachers and literacy coaches takes time. One of the challenges for literacy coaches in this study was the number of teachers, or schools, that demanded the literacy coach's attention. Ivy, a high school Spanish teacher, described the demands placed on the literacy coach compared to the teachers, who usually teach a single subject within one school. She said

I think the schedule that [the literacy coach] has to keep, and the number of buildings that she has to see prevents her from developing those relationships with teachers to get them to trust her.

Still, in spite of the time restrictions, trust remained an integral part of the teacher-literacy coach relationship. Annie, a literacy coach, summarized by saying, "That is the most important part of the whole coaching, is having people's trust."

Brady, a middle school language arts teacher, described the importance of trust as a tool that equalized the relationship between the teacher and the coach. She described how building trust was especially important when the coaching job was viewed as an administrative mandate or a step-above the teacher.

The trust factor, you know, has made [the relationship] develop. They [literacy coaches] went from being classroom teachers, to you're a leader, which I know has been difficult. If you don't get buy in from your teachers, it is not going to work.

When teachers felt that the literacy coach assumed a trusting, supportive, collegial role, they were more likely to not only work with the literacy coach, but also, share areas that he or she identified for improvement. Teachers reported being more willing to divulge gaps in their own professional development when they felt that the literacy coach kept their conversations confidential. Ali, a literacy coach, explained that as trust increased between her and her colleagues, the amount of time she was invited into classrooms to work with teachers increased, as well. In her first year as a literacy coach, she reported working directly with teachers 12% of her time; in year two, her time increased to 22%, and by year three, she was working directly with teacher 52% of the time. She said

I think my first year, [the teachers] were a little hesitant. There was some trust that needed to be built there. There are things that maybe they wouldn't tell a teacher that they might talk to a literacy coach about. I think that first year, I had to build that relationship with not only my staff, but my administration, to know that, yes, I am someone that can be trusted.

Successful coaches were characterized by teachers as "approachable", "open-minded", "willing", "assertive", "honest", and "authentic." Harper, a middle school language arts teacher, and relatively new to the district, described her first interactions with the literacy coach and "seeing" whom she was working with as a "real person."

I could tell that there was no fakeness in her. She brought down books for me. She brought down poster board and anything that I needed. She was very open and said 'contact me whenever you need it.'

Ivy, a high school Spanish teacher reported on the coaches' knowledge.

She's always staying up on what is going on. She doesn't just put information in a cabinet and it's forgotten about. I mean, she thinks very much about what she's doing and about how she can help.

In this study, coaches that were not only able to connect and support their colleagues, and rally teacher buy-in, were characterized by teachers as successful in their role. Through the increased visibility of the literacy coach, teachers reported increased contact with the literacy coach for support. More so, teachers talked about the positive aspects of coaching with each other. Ali, a literacy coach, reported, "A lot of it is word of mouth. When they hear it from a colleague, and not an administrator, then they will come and talk to me."

Brian, a literacy coach, echoed the importance of a positive teacher recommendation. He said that, "typically, people wouldn't come directly to me." He describes having a "host classroom" and as successful coaching was evidenced, news spread to other teachers. He said "Once we did something, it sort of spread from there. Word kind of got out. Everybody in the building, saw what [me and the teacher] were doing. We fought a lot for buy-in."

Participants mentioned that coaches who got involved with the faculty and spent time getting to know teachers increased the staff's willingness to work with the literacy coach. Ali, a literacy coach, reflected on the process of teacher recommendations, "I got one [recommendation] and when that teacher found out what I had, they were like, 'you need to go see her' and all of a sudden, I had everybody ask me to come in and work with them."

## Summary of the Findings

In this study, participants reported that secondary literacy coaching and secondary teaching were complicated by the subject area focus of the secondary setting. However, understanding the literacy coaches' role without formal introduction or definition from school administrators, put pressure on the relationship between teachers and coaches. Without clear administrative support, literacy coaches were forced to build relationships with teacher to garner teacher buy-in.

## Discussion

Understanding how secondary literacy coaches and secondary teachers perceive the teacher-coach relationship requires situational context. Secondary settings are notably different from elementary settings. The students' levels of literacy, and stages of development, inform the strategies and programs utilized by teachers (Fordham & Sandmann, 2006). Secondary settings are interwoven and interactive (O'Brien et al, 1995). Pedagogy and culture intermix with the curriculum and produce individualized situations (Hunt & Handsfield, 2013; Leent & Exley, 2013). Secondary content-area teachers are experts in their curricular area and protective of their subject's status and resources (Smith, 2012). Congruent with the literature, this study found that although cautious, teachers were willing to embed literacy instruction and embrace the possible effectiveness of literacy coaching in their classrooms.

Lack of administrative clarification regarding the literacy coach position complicates the teacher-coach relationship. For teachers, the way a literacy coach can support teaching must be made clear before teachers feel comfortable working with a literacy coach. Still, the role of the literacy coach is often ambiguous (Darwin, 2002; Hull, 2011; Roller, 2006; Selvaggi, 2016; Smith 2012). In order to be effective, both teachers and literacy coaches need a congruent definition of the coaching position (Coburn, 2005). This study supports the need for a definition of a literacy coach's job that reflects ILA standards (International Literacy Association, 2010; 2018). Teachers are more receptive of the literacy coach's role when the position is collegial versus administrative (Smith, 2012). Thus, school administrators must use teacher input when creating the literacy coach position and facilitate continuous conversation with both the teachers and literacy coach as the position evolves.

Without clear administrative directives, literacy coaches must rely on relationships to maintain the teacher-coach dynamic. Congruent with Casey (2006) and Greene (2004), relationships built and maintained between literacy coaches and teachers defines the success of the coaching model. However, literacy coaches voiced needing administrative support, and adequate time, to develop a positive, agreeable approach with teachers. The literacy coach has expert skills in content area reading instruction (Boyles, 2007). This study shows that to be an effective literacy coach, pedagogical knowledge is equally important as high-quality relationships with teachers. Thus, not only must school administrators define the literacy coach's role; they must allow time for the coach to interact with teachers outside of traditional professional development.

Trust is an important component of collegial relationships (Coburn, 2005). In this study, the lack of administrative clarification or assigning literacy coaches quasi-administrative tasks, complicated the teacher-coach relationship. Secondary teachers needed to trust that the literacy coach was not going to judge their teaching, or report problems to administrators. Literacy coaches were forced to prove credibility. Thus, role confusion elevated the importance of trust between teachers and literacy coaches. According to Greene (2004), school leaders are responsible for building a culture of trust. Through positive communication and a trusting relationship, school leaders can minimize teachers' defensiveness and create a collaborative climate (Fullan, 2016). According to Fullan (2016), teachers want to be recognized by school leaders when negotiating any type of curriculum or school change. Thus, school leaders should acknowledge and support both teachers, and literacy coaches, as part of a holistic model of school improvement.

### **Implications for Practice**

District and school administrators should enact best practices when implementing literacy coaching at the secondary level. Following are practical applications for administrative leaders:

**Clarify the role and responsibilities of a literacy coach.** The International Literacy Association (International Reading Association, 2006; International Literacy Association, 2010) provides a framework from which school districts can align the literacy coach's role and responsibilities. Literacy coaches are not teacher evaluators; they are teacher coaches. All stakeholders (teachers, coaches, and administrators) involved in the literacy coaching phenomenon need to collaboratively clarify the roles and responsibilities of the secondary literacy coach

**Involve multiple stakeholders in decision-making processes.** Administrators need to be reflective and deliberate when choosing a literacy coaching model, as well as purposeful in choosing the individual assuming the role. The modes and procedures that administrators utilize to articulate the role of the literacy coach and the ways in which the model is implemented, contributes to the efficacy of the position (Coburn, 2005).

**Provide support.** Literacy coaches, as well as teachers, need support and the opportunities to try new strategies, take risks, and act as innovators in order to change the culture of the school and increase the level of students' literacy achievement. Literacy coaches need time and support to connect with teachers (Hunt & Handsfield, 2013; Sandvold & Baxter, 2008). Through informal conversations and collegial dialog, the literacy coach can establish a helpful supportive role.

**Be strategic when choosing the individual for the literacy coach position.** The individual chosen to assume the role of the literacy coach impacts teachers' willingness to participate in any type of professional development with the literacy coach (Casey, 2006; Jay & Strong, 2008). The literacy coach's personality traits can both positively or negatively affect the development and growth of the relationship with both teachers and administrators.

### **Conclusion**

Literacy coaching positively impacts teachers and student learning (Casey, 2006; Jay & Strong, 2008). However, multiple constructs intersect to create an effective coaching culture. Individual characteristics of a coach, the districts procedures in implementing coaching models, as well as the importance of positive collegial relationships between secondary literacy coaches and secondary content-area teacher, can create a successful and effective coaching climate. To improve schools, administrators must embrace their role in defining and supporting the literacy coaching model.

### **Future Research**

This study was focused on a single educational region of a northeast state and a sample of five literacy coaches and nine teachers. Congruent with purpose of qualitative inquiry, the small sample allowed the amplification of the literacy coach's voice, and an opportunity to understand the construct of the relationship between coaches and teachers in the secondary setting. Future research would benefit by expanding this study to other states and educational regions. Future studies could also include the perspective of school and district administrators, and case studies of schools or districts that have implemented successful coaching models at the secondary level.

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# Teachers' Perceptions on the Impacts of Social Emotional Learning Program Implementation

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*Research has shown the significance in social-emotional learning in children and adults. Likewise, studies have shown the significance on the type of leadership style an organization uses to maximize their employee's work ethic. Despite, these two known concepts, there is a limited number of studies that show how leadership impacts the implementation of a program. This qualitative study aims to understand teacher perceptions on how a shared leadership approach impacts implementing a social-emotional learning program. Through open ended surveys and focus group interviews, data will be collected to interpret how teachers perceive shared leadership has impacted the implementation of a social-emotional learning program. In addition, this study will provide insight into how school culture and teachers' interactions and experiences can impact the implementation of a social-emotional learning program. The data collected was coded and organized into categories to identify common themes among the participants. Following the data analysis, the researcher answered the research questions: (1) What were the teachers' experiences with implementing a social-emotional learning program through shared leadership? (2) What were the teachers' perceptions of the school culture during the implementation of social-emotional learning program? (3) What were the teachers' prior learnings, and experiences of the implementation of a social-emotional learning program?*

**Keywords:** Social-emotional Learning (SEL), School Culture, Social Constructivism, Shared Leadership

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is a concept that has become very popular in all regions of the world. With mass shootings, COVID-19, and everyday struggles, the social-emotional well-being of children is becoming more focused on in education. There are a variety of programs available to educational settings that encompass five main components: social awareness, self-management, self-awareness, responsible decision making, and relationship skills (CASEL, 2013). SEL programs are typically implemented based on the school's leadership style, practices, and what they feel is in the best interest of the school, what fits the school's needs. Each leadership theory, or practice, can impact the faculty and staff differently. With this idea in mind, the study presented shares how shared leadership, along with other components of a school, can impact the implementation of a social-emotional learning program.

Through a qualitative approach, this study describes teachers' perceptions of shared leadership on implementing a social-emotional learning program. The study also examines how teacher experiences, and the school culture impacted this process. Those schools who are interested in adding a social-emotional learning program to their curriculum will gain a better understanding of how to do so effectively from this study's results.

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of the study was to learn how shared leadership, school culture, and teacher interactions and experiences impact an SEL program implementation. To provide knowledge into this experience, the qualitative study presented addressed the following research questions:

R1: What were the teachers' experiences with implementing a social-emotional learning program through shared leadership?

R2: What were the teachers' perceptions of the school culture during the implementation of a social-emotional learning program?

R3: What were the teachers' prior learnings, and experiences of the implementation of a social-emotional learning program?

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

The theoretical and conceptual framework of a study provides insight into what is already known, theories that guide the researcher in developing their study, and other significant information that help the researcher develop their methodology for a study (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The study presented focuses on teachers' perceptions of how shared leadership, school culture, and teacher experiences (social constructivism) can impact the implementation process of a social-emotional learning program. Qualitative research takes place in a natural setting where the event or idea being studied occurs/occurred. Through interviews, observations, and note-taking data is collected to gain a better understanding of what is occurring. Therefore, it was ideal to conduct a qualitative study to better understand how these three theories impact the implementation process.

Shared leadership, social constructivism, and organizational culture theory are all of a social nature that were the foundation of this study. First, shared leadership is becoming more popular and influential in the workplace, especially in schools, due to its positive impacts. Various studies show that shared leadership has shown a tremendous impact on job satisfaction, school

culture and climate, school commitment, and student achievement (Naiker & Mestry, 2013; Tanrıöğen & İşcan, 2016; Ward & Graham-Brown, 2018). Additionally, shared leadership encourages all members of the organization to discuss and collaborate to ensure its' goals are achieved (Strike et al., 2016; Towler, 2019).

The social constructivism framework suggests multiple realities co-constructed by our experiences and interactions with one another, even the researcher, which was used to better understand the teachers' perceptions in this study (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The data collected is very subjective through social constructivism because there are multiple realities to these experiences. To better understand teachers' perceptions social constructivism was used to analyze the information provided by the participants.

The final theory for this framework is organizational culture theory. Schein believes that an organization's culture has three components: artifacts, values, and basic assumptions (Burkus, 2014). Artifacts are what everyone can see when they enter the organization, values are the organization's set values and norms, and basic assumptions are the foundation of an organization. Basic assumptions are the behaviors and actions of the members of the organization, despite what the values may be. In 1992, Schein stated that the school culture comes from a group of people who solve problems together as a team (Grogan, 2013).

Shared leadership, social constructivism, and organizational culture theory are all theories based on social interactions. For this reason, they complimented the ideas behind the study of implementing a social-emotional learning program that was conducted at one school, especially since the school studied used a shared leadership approach.

### **Review of the Literature**

As previously stated, three theories helped guide the researcher in studying the implementation of a social-emotional learning program. Shared leadership, organizational culture theory, and social constructivism theory have been studied in a variety of ways.

Shared leadership is one of many influential ideologies in education. It encourages all parties to take on leadership roles by giving all stakeholders the opportunity to share their thoughts, ideas, and experiences that help lead to the common goals of the school (Strike et al., 2016). For example, when all members (faculty and staff) select a program to enhance the students' education, shared leadership is being used to reach the common goal. This process allows for all teachers to have a voice and share their own ideas and experiences about the programs. It is well known that when teachers are happy in the workplace, the students are more successful than if the school has a negative morale (Naicker & Mestry, 2013). Ideally, through shared leadership, a more positive morale would be achieved in the workplace. Through this approach, teachers can freely communicate their thoughts, create positive relationships with all personnel, and help in the decision-making process which in turn can create a positive culture and climate, making teachers happier (Ward & Graham-Brown, 2018; Tanrıöğen & İşcan, 2016).

Organizational cultural theory states that basic assumptions, or beliefs, are what shape the values of an organization. These values lead what people outside the organization see, the organization's culture (Schein, 2003). Studies show that the culture of an organization impacts the workers' satisfaction and commitment to the organization (Roper, 2011; Burns et al., 2021). Additionally, in the educational setting the changes of a culture can impact student behavior and

experiences (Story, 2010). Various studies show that culture influences various components of an organization, it also shows that culture can impact an individual's development and growth through social interactions.

Individuals develop and grow from their experiences with the world around them based on the social constructivism theory (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Lynch, 2016). Teachers enhance their practices by doing this through professional development. According to one study, the culture of an organization can influence the professional development of individuals (Rauf et al., 2012). Professional development is needed to enhance thinking and teaching practices (Guzey et al., 2014, p.148; Edmondson & Choudhry, 2018). However, it is important to be able to practice the execution of this new learning. The same is true when teaching social-emotional learning.

Social-emotional learning has a correlation to student and adult performance, along with short term and long term effects to all parties (CASEL, 2013; McCormick et al., 2019). Schools that implement an SEL program have seen an increase in group cohesion and a positive school climate (Perryman et al., 2020; CASEL, 2013). The program impacts all individuals in a positive manner, students, teachers, staff, and administrators

Several studies show that social-emotional learning positively impacts students. Students can better utilize the coping skills taught to them through the implementation of an SEL program. With the opportunity to practice the skills of SEL, students were able to show empathy, trust in others, and solve problems on their own (Perryman et al., 2020). Whenever students experience a negative emotion, they can express this clearly to others in a positive manner (Perryman et al., 2020; CASEL, 2013; Gundersen, 2014; Ahmed et al., 2020). Amazingly, one study showed that early intervention of SEL could limit the number of students receiving SPED services (McCormick et al., 2019).

When looking at how adults are impacted by social-emotional learning, several studies give insight into its benefits. Researchers learned that social programs, where individuals meet to build relationships, are essential for universities and colleges. Thompson (2018) found that SEL plays a vital role in the success of international students feeling a part of the community or college in foreign lands. The same is found among teachers. "The stresses of teaching all too often lead to a cycle of diminishing well-being for educators that negatively correlates to student learning" (Nankin & Fenchel, 2019, para. 4). Nankin was an educator who began using yoga to help reduce her own stress and saw a transformation in her students (Nankin & Fenchel, 2019). Whether it is through yoga, medication or any other activity, Nankin's actions show that SEL is important to students and all individuals and can impact all parties when conducted appropriately.

## **Methodology**

Qualitative methods involve the presentation of a narrative based on analysis and interpretation of gathered data and can be presented in the form of artifacts, observations, or interviews with participants (Nowell et al., 2017; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). A qualitative study aims to interpret another individual's experience to generate human knowledge based on those experiences. The components of qualitative research are what made this methodology the best for this study.

Two types of sampling were used to select the study site and participants. Convenience sampling was used because the site studied is the researcher's workplace. Additionally, the school implemented a social-emotional learning program for the first time which allowed for a true understanding of the implementation process. Likewise, criterion sampling was used to gather the appropriate participants and a school that practices shared leadership (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The researcher gathered 14 participants to partake in the questionnaire and six to participate in the focus group interview. Additionally, the researcher gathered consent from all participants through writing. It was also shared, despite the researcher's position at the school, that all information would be confidential and that their identity would not be shared with anyone. To eliminate bias, the researcher did not include their own experiences or opinions with the participants.

Following data collection of the questionnaire, the data were analyzed by focusing on individual responses to understand participants' experiences (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). Data was reviewed twice to highlight words or phrases that stood out. First, a table was created that showed what each participant said for each question. Additionally, the words or phrases that stood out to the researcher were placed in a separate column labeled key words. These statements were highlighted to understand how the participants experienced the implementation (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Additionally, patterns were determined that showed themes amongst the participants' experiences (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). Finally, themes were analyzed to determine the overall meaning of the participants' experiences so that the research questions were answered.

Following the questionnaire analysis, the researcher selected participants who completed the questionnaire to participate in a semi-structured focus group interview (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The participants were selected based on having similar views and being from various grade levels to provide the researcher with a balanced representation of the school. The focus group interview was recorded using two devices to ensure accuracy and validity.

After conducting the interview, the discussions were transcribed. Each line of the script was labeled numerically, which was used later for identification purposes. Once all data was transcribed, the researcher sent the transcript to the participants of the interview to review for member checking. If they wanted to add additional information or revise a response, the researcher noted it in the transcript following the original interview. This process allowed the researcher to get to know the data more and the participants to adjust their responses if needed (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003).

Following member checking, the researcher used the same process to analyze the transcription as the questionnaire. The researcher analyzed each question for common statements, phrases, or feelings. These statements were highlighted, so the researcher understood how the participants experienced the implementation (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Notes were taken for each specific question and analyzed to find emergent categories, that led to a theme (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). Themes were analyzed to determine the overall meaning of the experience of implementing an SEL program. The questionnaire and the focus group interview data allowed the researcher to answer all research questions. The findings also allowed the researcher to provide educational leaders with an understanding of how shared leadership practices impact the implementation of an SEL program, the culture of the school, and teachers themselves.

## Sample Demographics

Fourteen teachers of students in kindergarten to sixth grade completed a questionnaire through Google Forms and six of these teachers participated in a focus group interview. By gathering a wide range of participants from various grade levels in the school (prekindergarten to sixth grade), the data better represented the school's experience as a whole. Additionally, it was important to gather participants with a wide variety of experience (zero to 30 years) in the grade level they were teaching during the implementation of SEL.

## Results

When analyzing the data, three themes were identified that correlated with the three research questions. Below, Table One provides a graphical representation of the themes that emerged.

**Table 1**  
*Themes and Patterns*

<b>Implementation of SEL: Themes and Patterns</b>			
<i>Research Question</i>	RQ1: What were the teachers' experiences with implementing a social-emotional learning program through shared leadership?	RQ2: What were the teachers' perceptions of the school culture during the implementation of the social-emotional learning program?	RQ3: What were the teachers' prior learnings, and experiences of the implementation of a social-emotional learning program?
<i>Theme</i>	Most teachers found shared leadership to bring a positive impact on implementing a social-emotional learning program.	Most teachers felt that the culture as a whole did not change but stayed positive as it was before.	Most teachers' experiences allowed for positive implementation of SEL because they found it important through their training and lessons.

<i>Pattern</i> <i>PTN=Pattern</i>	PTN 1. Shared leadership allowed for all voices to be heard.	PTN 1. Lack of changes in school culture.	PTN 1. Most teachers taught SEL in an informal practice prior to this SEL program implementation.
	PTN 2. Shared leadership allowed all stakeholders to collaborate.	PTN 2. SEL's impact on the school.	PTN 2. SEL's impacts teachers' well-being for the better.
			PTN 3. Students are positively impacted by the implementation of the SEL program.
			PTN 4. Teachers had mixed feelings about the overall process of implementing the program.

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The three research questions were addressed, and insight was provided through the questionnaire and the focus group interview as data collection tools. After analyzing all the data, the researcher found trends to the research questions and determined sub-patterns, which led to the patterns shown, and ultimately the themes for each question.

### **Research Question 1**

The first theme to emerge, *Most teachers found shared leadership to bring a positive impact on implementing a social-emotional learning program*, answered the first research question. This theme stemmed from two patterns: shared leadership allowed for all voices to be heard and individuals to collaborate. When analyzing the data from both the questionnaire and focus group interviews, there was an overwhelming number of individuals that found the shared leadership approach to be beneficial to the implementation process of the social-emotional learning program.

The first few moments of the focus group interview were spent discussing the voting process that took place. During the focus group interview, one teacher shared,

“...With the buy-in especially because I know that there were some people that did not vote for choose love, but because it was your colleagues you know kind of getting you on board. It was easier to get on board, even though that wasn't necessarily the one that you wanted if that makes sense.”

Another participant felt similarly to this teacher but had a different outlook on the experience. In the questionnaire the participant stated, “There was a committee but I feel that

the choice of the SEL program was selected based on what other schools are doing, not necessarily what is best or what all of our staff was on board with.” Therefore, despite the favoring opinions of having their voices heard, not all participants felt that the voices that were shared during the voting were accurate to their own beliefs.

When diving deeper into the collaboration component, two participants specifically stated that shared leadership allowed for collaboration. Participant 11 shared that with the shared leadership approach they were able to go to others for guidance or gain new ideas.

Additionally, six participants shared that they appreciated being able to share their ideas and thoughts with their colleagues. Participant 3 said,

After adopting the Choose Love program and creating an SEL committee, many of our teachers and faculty members have taken the initiative to share their lessons/activities with the rest of the staff during our monthly meetings.” and “We got resources to use to help us teach our students about social and emotional learning and the leadership team is always available for extra support, whether if it's for our students or for ourselves.

The response of Participant 3 showed that shared leadership allowed for all stakeholders to collaborate and share ideas with one another. Additionally, this approach allowed for this specific individual to feel that they have extra support if needed. Therefore, shared leadership brought a positive impact on implementing a social-emotional learning program.

## Research Question 2

The second theme, *Most teachers felt that the culture as a whole did not change but stayed positive as it was before*, was found through the analysis of the second research question. When analyzing the data from both the questionnaire and focus group interviews, many participants had a hard time sharing their experiences and thoughts about the school culture. Due to COVID-19, it was difficult for teachers to share how the school culture changed since implementation. Despite this, two participants specifically stated that the culture of the school was positive before the implementation of SEL. However, one teacher shared in the focus group interview,

I do see a benefit in students, you know, like just their coping mechanism, how they treat others, you know, like and how to apologize. I think it stopped there. I don't see a difference within the faculty and then admin, and the culture of our school. I was really hoping that it was going to happen.

Likewise, Participant 11 shared, “The school’s culture is definitely going to change for the better with more implementation.” Therefore, a majority of participants shared that the positive school culture that existed prior to the implementation of SEL is still positive. Additionally, one individual feels that it is only going to get better through the continuation of the SEL program.

Throughout the questionnaire analysis and focus group interview, participants shared how they felt that the implementation of the SEL program impacted the school itself. One participant shared in the questionnaire that,

The school as a whole was empathetic for the most part, but since implementation, more students are stepping up to show that they care about others. They are especially standing up for kids by those who are new to the school and may not have had SEL program.

Other participants shared this same perception. Additionally, they stated that the implementation of the program impacted the teachers as well,

It seems as though the lessons that we teach the students are carrying on into the personal lives of the teachers because the teachers seem to be coping well and "choosing love" during this highly stressful time.

Through the perception of these teachers, the implementation of the program not only impacted the students, but the adults as well. Therefore, although it was not the purpose of this study, the researcher found that based on the teachers' perceptions the implementation of this SEL program did improve the school's culture.

### Research Question 3

The final theme found was *Most teachers' experiences allowed for positive implementation of SEL because they found it important through their training and lessons*. One reason behind this may be due to the fact that many of the teachers were already teaching SEL in the past, but not through a formal curriculum. This instruction by all but one teacher showed that they already found SEL to be important.

Several of the participants shared that they found that the SEL program implementation impacted their students and their own well-being. Six teachers stated that teaching SEL to their students helped themselves have an open, positive mindset and to reflect on their own well-being. Five participants shared that the implementation of the SEL program helped them manage negative emotions as well. One shared, "I truly feel that the lessons being taught to our students opened my eyes as well, as to how to handle everyday worries and stress". While another stated,

They are excited to put vocabulary and names to certain feelings and actions that they didn't have before. Words like "passive aggressive" or "Mindful meditation" to help them understand their own styles of anger, comprehension and how to deal with it. This program also gives students who have a higher emotional IQ a chance to engage and be more confident where in academics they may shy away from participation."

Through both of these teachers' perceptions, it is clear that the implementation of SEL impacts their students positively.

Despite the positive comments and experiences of these teachers, it should be noted that there were some conflicting emotions. Table 2 shows the conflicting feelings of three participants.

**Table 4**  
*Conflicting Feelings*

Participant #	Positive Feeling Key: P1.Q1.1= Participant 1.Question1.Line 1	Negative Feeling Key: P1.Q1.1= Participant 1.Question1.Line 1
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2	P2.Q7.3 The implementation I think was very smooth.	P2.Q7.5 Maybe if we had done breakout groups to collaborate with other members of the same grade level to take ideas from each other.
3	P3.Q7.1 I feel more comfortable teaching it as I do it using our Choose Love program.	P3.Q7.2 At first I didn't know where to begin, I was honestly overwhelmed with all the information I received, but once I got an idea of what to teach and how to teach it, it's definitely getting easier.
6	P6.Q7.1 I feel that it is important to cover, however I struggle with having the time to teach all the standards that are required and to cover the SEL lessons to its fullest.	P6.Q7.1 I feel that it is important to cover, however I struggle with having the time to teach all the standards that are required and to cover the SEL lessons to its fullest.

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These three participants when asked, “If you could change anything about this experience, what would you change?” had conflicted emotions. Participant 2 felt that the implementation was smooth but felt that there should have been more collaboration between teammates. Participant 3 shared that they felt more comfortable with the program now that they have started teaching it but was overwhelmed in the beginning. Lastly, participant 6 shared that they felt it was important to teach the SEL program but struggled to find time for it with the short time teachers have to teach. These specific individuals show how the implementation of the program caused conflicting emotions within themselves. However, it was also shown by all participants.

Additionally, three participants shared how the implementation process went well and five shared how the implementation process had some blemishes. Of the five participants that shared their thoughts on the blemishes of the implementation, none stated that the implementation process was done wrong. They did share ways that it could improve. For example, Participant 5 shared:

There is always room for improvement. I think, because of when our implementation rolled out (pretty much pandemic times), it would have been helpful to not only give us ideas but to maybe have "packaged" lessons - like, pretty much, everything ready to go (lesson plan, materials, etc.). With all that we've already got on our plates, to plan and prep one more thing added just a little bit more stress. I appreciate that we had the flexibility to implement and tailor to our specific situations/students but, sometimes it's easier to just be given something ready-made, ready-to-go. Also, I think gen. ed. is usually where the activities are geared in terms of where/when to implement the suggestions so,

if it was a shared activity, I would have to think of something similar but different enough that the kids wouldn't say, "I did this already."

This participant's experience shows that they appreciated the flexibility of the implementation process and how each class was able to tailor it to their students' needs. However, the blemishes that were recognized could easily be addressed.

### **Conclusion**

Through a qualitative approach, this study described teachers' perceptions of shared leadership on the implementation of a social-emotional learning program. The study also examined how teacher experiences and school culture impacted the implementation of a new educational program. The findings showed that shared leadership had a positive impact on the implementation of the SEL program because teachers felt that their voices were heard and enjoyed collaborating and sharing ideas with one another. Due to a majority of the teachers previously teaching SEL in an informal style, it can be assumed that this helped them implement the SEL program more effectively. Although the researcher's goal was not to see the impact on teachers and students, the data collected did show this pattern. Both teachers and students were positively impacted by the implementation of the SEL program, validating the literature. Through this study's findings, educational leaders can learn from the teachers' perceptions on how shared leadership, school culture, and teacher experiences can impact the implementation of a new program in the school setting.

### **Implications of the Research**

Several studies have shown that shared leadership can have a tremendous impact on school culture and climate (Naiker & Mestry, 2013; Tanrıöğen & İşcan, 2016; Ward & Graham-Brown, 2018), school commitment (Naiker & Mestry, 2013; Ward & Graham-Brown, 2018), and student achievement (Naiker & Mestry, 2013). Concerning social-emotional learning, studies show the impacts of implementing social-emotional learning programs in schools (Ahmed et al., 2020; Neth et al., 2020; Perryman et al., 2020; and Thompson, 2020). However, the literature did not provide a variety of studies that used qualitative methods to study these concepts.

This research brought to light that shared leadership, school culture, and teachers' experiences can impact the implementation of a social-emotional learning program through qualitative methods. Using qualitative methods was essential. It not only added a new approach to the literature, but also allowed the researcher to gain deeper understanding of what teachers experienced that could not have been achieved through quantitative methods. This study highlights how shared leadership, school culture, and teachers' experiences intertwine when implementing an SEL program. Educational leaders must keep in mind that these three components can positively, or negatively, impact the implementation of any program at their school. Therefore, when implementing new programs in a school setting educational leaders need to remember that their leadership practices, school culture, and the teachers' experiences can impact the implementation process.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Through this study significant evidence was gathered to answer the three research questions. However, due to COVID-19 restrictions, the exploration as to how school culture impacts the implementation process was not adequately conducted. Therefore, it is recommended that future researchers who are interested in this topic keep in mind the restrictions that were brought forth by the pandemic. These restrictions can impact an adequate analysis of an organization's culture. Additionally, it may be beneficial to gather data on the perceptions of members in an organization prior to the implementation of the program. This would allow the researcher to reference participants' previous perceptions on the culture when analyzing how the culture was impacted with the implementation of the program.

Another recommendation for future research is to continue using qualitative methods in various schools. Researchers are better able to understand an experience that an individual, or group, has through qualitative methods. Using qualitative research will allow the researcher to share examples and experiences of the various schools, different leadership practices, and school culture impacted each school differently. This would add to the literature about all three concepts when analyzing the impacts of implementing a social emotional learning program, or any program. When conducting the research, it would be important to meet with the teachers prior to the implementation process to learn what their current feelings are about the given program. Meeting with the teachers prior, during, and after the implementation process will provide other educational leaders with the ideas on how to effectively implement a social emotional learning program.

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# The “Unite the Right” Rally and Charlottesville City Schools: The Transformation of a Crisis

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*Educational leaders at all levels must be prepared to address crises and their aftermaths. The conventional wisdom on crises and their management suggests that while crisis can originate from myriad sources, they largely proceed according to predictable stages. Our study draws from traditional and more critical literature on crisis and crisis management to understand the case the 2017 Unite the Right rally and its impact on Charlottesville City Schools. Specifically, we unpack the unfolding nature of the crisis and the district superintendent’s leadership through each phase of the crisis. We use the notion of paracrisis and crisis of challenge to understand how an acute and traumatic experience for the school community evolved into a crisis that challenged the legitimacy of the school district for its history of policy and practices that sustained institutionally racist practices for decades. Our findings illustrate how the process of crisis transformation occurred, and more importantly, how the superintendent’s approach to leadership also changed to meet the new demands of the evolving crisis. These findings raise important questions and implications for how educational leaders might think about the crises they face, and the crisis management plans that guide that work.*

**Keywords:** Crisis, Crisis management, Crisis transformation, School district leadership

From natural disasters to terrorist attacks, corporate scandals to product defects, crises are an ever-present reality facing society and organizations, including institutions of public education (Bhaduri, 2019; Bowers et al., 2017; Grissom & Conden, 2021; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993; Wang, 2008). Globalization and the complexity of modern society amplify the frequency, intensity, scale, and diversity of crises (e.g., Lalonde, 2007; Mitroff, 2002; Mouline, 2018; Perrow, 1999; Wang & Kuo, 2017). Yet, while experts acknowledge the intensifying impact of natural and social crises, our understanding of *crisis* as phenomenon and how to lead through crisis has remained largely unchanged for decades. Instead, the linear conceptualizations of crisis manifestation and crisis management leave leaders under-equipped to successfully guide organizations through the actual complexity that crises present (Coombs & Halladay, 2012; Ren, 2000). Nowhere are these shortcomings more critical than in our service-oriented institutions, particularly public education. For example, crises of school violence, community upheaval in response to acts of racial violence, immigration raids that affect family units, and recently the COVID-19 pandemic have not only challenged children and families, but also, the educators that serve them.

This case study focused on one superintendent and her leadership through crisis. Our purpose was to explore the relationship between one crisis—the White supremacist “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, VA—and the superintendent’s leadership during that time. The following questions guided the study: 1) how and in what ways did the “Unite the Right” rally create crisis conditions for the school district? And 2) how and in what ways did the superintendent lead and manage throughout the crisis? In our discussion, we explore lessons drawn from the study about 1) the multi-dimensionality of crises and 2) the leadership skills, behaviors, and dispositions required to lead a district through a complex crisis.

### **Conceptual Frame: The Crisis Phenomenon and its Management**

Our case analysis is aided by organizational literature addressing how crises are defined conceptually, how organizations manage crises, and what post-crisis outcomes are possible and why. We also address the limitations and sometimes oversimplifications inherent in the crisis literature that can create pitfalls for policy makers and leaders—particularly educational leaders.

#### **Crisis Defined**

Scholars generally agree that crises are phenomena that impact organizations, locales, and regions unexpectedly and with a degree of consequence that makes functioning and carrying out missions challenging or impossible (Fink, 1986; Mitroff, 2002, 2005; Peason & Clair, 1992). The threat to an organization’s survival depends on whether the events’ level of disruption “occurs at a rate and magnitude beyond the ability of the normal social process to rectify” (Ren, 2000, p. 14). Crisis scholars note that crises may originate internally as the result of, e.g., gross mismanagement, or externally from natural disasters, economic declines, or other external calamities. Regardless of severity or origin, crises demand action by the organization to survive and adapt or risk failure. The question then remains, what courses of action might be taken?

#### **Crisis Management as (Linear) Process**

That crises demand organizational action has led to the development of processes intended to make sense of, navigate, and ultimately adapt and survive them. These process models play an important role in giving structure to a phenomenon that while inevitable, is unpredictable. Crisis management stage models have existed for decades; yet their evolution has been limited. These linear process models share common stages: pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis (Fink, 1986; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993; Coombs, 2012). More contemporary models depict a feedback loop of organizational learning to survive and adapt to crises.

Scholars contend that the pre-crisis, or prodromol stage, is a time when early warning signals are present (Fink, 1986). In pre-crisis mode, organizations demonstrate a varied capacity to detect and respond to crisis signals quickly to mitigate impact. Crisis theorists found that successful companies and organizations were proactive in these early stages by focusing on signal detection (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). Pearson and Mitroff (1993) argued that by scanning one's internal and external environments, organizations were better positioned to distinguish baseline feedback indicators from aberrant telltales of an impending crisis. But early detection presumes organizations have in place a way to gather relevant internal and environmental data that feedback into the decision-making apparatus of the organization (Bechler, 1995; Fink, 1986, Liou, 2015; Veil, 2011).

The second stage recognizes that impactful events are unfolding at speeds with little potential for reversal (Fink, 1984; Ren, 2000). More recent considerations of acute crisis responses focus on identifying and addressing organizational weaknesses, while also training for and implementing emergency responses. Many organizations, including schools and districts, focus most of their efforts on managing crises at the acute stage (Cornell & Sheras, 1998; Hess & Lowery, 2020). However, while leaders may succeed at averting some crisis impacts, other negative impacts often break through (Schlafer, 2009). In the context of educational institutions, this stage manifests in crisis planning and training (Liou, 2015).

The final stage of crisis management—organizational adaptation and recovery—suggests that the difference between organizational success or failure hinges on organizational learning (Wang, 2008; Veil, 2011). Organizational learning is the process of individual and collective knowledge-building from past events to address present situations, ultimately becoming more prepared for future crises (Larsson, 2010). Put differently, learning occurs when an organization critically examines actions (not) taken and environmental conditions leading up to the crisis (Argyris & Schon, 1996). However, stage literature does little to account for variety associated with crises—their types, origins, severity, and complexity.

### **Critical Considerations of Crisis as Phenomenon**

The views described above form the bedrock of our understanding about crises. But we argue that educational leaders and policy makers need to consider elements of crisis management given less attention. Crisis origins—be they natural, social, political, or economic—can make a difference in how they impact societies and organizations and how that impact plays out (Coombs, 2012). One crisis might manifest differently over time as it morphs and evolves, or it can spawn new crises. Crises can affect organizations physically, culturally, and economically with each of these avenues potentially threatening organizations' reputations and legitimacy.

Second, it is essential that leaders consider the paths through which organizations succeed or fail to adapt to crisis and, thus, learn. These responses sit along a continuum from threat rigidity to organizational learning (Nathan, 2000; Bundy et al. 2017). Organizations that respond to crises as threats typically engage in numerous practices detrimental to their survival (Bundy et al, 2017; Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; Lagadec, 1997; Veil, 2011). For example, threat-reactive organizational members often fail to see beyond their own experiences. A history of success or a compulsion to “fit in” especially blind in this way (Langer, 1983; Perrow, 1999; Tompkins, 2005). In many cases, organizations prefer to focus on communications and public relations, rather than engaging the root problems themselves (Bowers et al., 2017; Coombs, 2012). Again, though there is opportunity for growth and improvement through crisis management, requisite learning seldom takes place (Wang, 2008).

On the other hand, organizations that leverage crises as an opportunity to adapt often flourish post-crisis (Barnett & Pratt, 2000; Coombs, 2012; Mitroff, 2005; Nathan, 2000). Bundy et al. and others argued that these organizations tended to engage in certain types of mitigating activities. For example, learning organizations often established task forces to review an organization’s crisis performance. The most effective task forces invited constructive feedback from internal and external stakeholders to triangulate feedback (Lagadec, 1997; Lalonde, 2007; Robert & Lajtha, 2002). Frandsen and Johansen (2017) described adaptable organizations facing crises as those that sought not to simply resolve problems, but to understand and treat the causal conditions that gave rise to them. Finally, organizational capacity to leverage crises for gain occurs when key stakeholders become experts on their industries’ own history with past crises (Coombs, 2012; Larsson, 2010). These adaptive strategies point to organizational learning through formal processes aimed at proactive activities and less toward one-off emergency responses.

However, effective crisis management frameworks still fail to consider the complexity of crises. For service-oriented organizations, crises can impact in myriad ways. While natural, economic, and social crises garner more attention, Coombs and Holladay (2012) introduced the *crisis of challenge* when “stakeholders claim an organization is acting in an irresponsible or unethical manner.” (p. 408, see also Lerbinger, 1997). Further, they described social media’s role in turning what once may have served as a precursor to potential crisis— i.e., “early public challenges”—into a phenomenon that mimics early stages of crisis (p. 409). They referred to this potential crisis as the *paracrisis*—a time when external stakeholder’s *challenge*, via social media, an organization’s reputation and capacity to meet its mission. In this manner, these motivated stakeholders can create conditions for a full-blown crisis using social media as the accelerant (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). In these contexts, organizations must manage by assessing the power, legitimacy, and urgency of the paracrisis threat (Coombs & Holladay, 2012).

Further, crisis definitions and management models fail to consider how crises may impact organizations and communities in unexpected ways. For example, linked crises—that is one crisis leading into a second and even a third—are a common result of crisis events, yet they remain underexplored. These linked crises can occur within the same space as one crisis triggers another (Ren, 2000). Or a crisis event in one space or region can trigger events sequentially in neighboring, or for that matter, far-flung regions. Finally, Ren argued that unpredictable and layered crises can affect “social operations beyond the general notion of damage” creating “unique vulnerabilities” that the layered crisis may exploit (Ren, 2000, p. 16).

## Design and Methods

This case study focuses on Dr. Rosa Atkins', Superintendent of Charlottesville City Schools (CCS), during her tenure through the evolving crisis precipitated by the "Unite the Right Rally" in August 2017. According to Yin (2014), case study design involves in-depth empirical inquiry into a contemporary phenomenon and its real-world situation. Stake (2010) argued that case studies are circumstances that, by their distinctive nature, establish boundaries that delimit the case. Yin (2014) also noted that a case is both distinct from, yet embedded in, its environment. This case meets each of these criteria as we examine how the district responded to the initial, acute crisis and then the chronic sociopolitical crisis that came after.

### Methods

This study relied on data gathered through interviews and documents. The Superintendent of CSS, Dr. Atkins, was the primary participant and focus of the study. We also purposefully sampled stakeholders from CCS and the community. Interviews were semi-structured. Open-ended questions supported the dialectic process and co-construction of knowledge (Strauss & Corbin, 2014) to facilitate the collection of the multiple perspectives regarding the crisis situation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016).

We interviewed the superintendent on three occasions across approximately nine months. The final interview also served as a member check to clarify and examine emergent themes and interpretations. We also invited 27 other stakeholders to be interviewed. Fifteen consented to be interviewed. Specifically, we interviewed past and present members of the district's school board, central office leadership, building-level administration, teaching faculty, and support staff. Current parents and former students also participated. Five participants were male, and ten were female. Five participants were people of color.

The case study generated over 100 documents for analysis. Documents included articles from the local newspapers and circulars and national periodicals including, but not limited to, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. We initially organized documents according to the initial crisis (August 2017 through October 2018) and the subsequent crisis from approximately January 2019 through May 2020. These time frames captured periods of leadership in the wake of the crisis and then the aftermath of a *New York Times* investigative report. School district documents were also collected and analyzed. District documents included official statements, policies and practices, and social media feeds. The COVID-19 pandemic canceled any planned observations.

We borrowed analytic approaches from grounded theory's constant comparative method, especially the open and axial coding stages (Strauss & Corbin, 2014). We engaged with the data through a process of open and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 2014) that facilitated discovery and modeling of emergent relationships. These emergent findings guided the scope and direction of subsequent data collection. Our active collection and analysis ended as we achieved data saturation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 2014). To facilitate the organization and analysis of such a large data set we utilized NVIVO qualitative data analysis software.

## Findings

Our findings are organized into two sections. The first section addresses the initial crisis and how it catalyzed a second crisis of challenge (Coombs & Holladay, 2012) for the school district and superintendent. And second, we explore the superintendent's distinct approaches to the crisis as it evolved from an acute traumatic crisis to a chronic and social crisis.

### **“Unite the Right” Rally: The Evolution of a Crisis**

Charlottesville's White Supremacist rally was never an independent, stand-alone event. Rather, it was a reaction to a national reckoning and racial awakening. Specifically, the rally participants purported to protest Charlottesville's plans to remove a Confederate statue from a downtown park. The statue removal was part of a nation-wide movement joined by many localities following the racially targeted mass shooting in Charleston in 2015. The rally participants' attendance reflected another nation-wide development—the increase in White supremacist activism since 2015. Most protesters came to the rally from across many states and affiliations outside the Charlottesville community. A fact-check piece in the Washington Post (May 8, 2020) reported:

The city's actions inspired a group of neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and related groups to schedule the “Unite the Right” rally for the weekend of Aug. 12, 2017, in Charlottesville. There is little dispute over the makeup of the groups associated with the rally. A well-known white nationalist, Richard Spencer, was involved; former Ku Klux Klan head David Duke was a scheduled speaker.

Interview data reflected the sentiment that Charlottesville became “ground zero” for both groups—those seeking racial justice, in part, through the removal of antebellum historical figures and white supremacists seeking to preserve them.

### ***From Crisis to Collective Self-Reflection***

After the initial days of the rally and ensuing demonstrations and violence, an organic process of community self-reflection began to take shape. This development of heightened stakeholder awareness took place in three stages. First, the broader external crisis heightened the general public's interest in and focus on racial inequities and dynamics as the events of Charlottesville made national news and across a variety of outlets. Second, local stakeholders then identified these same structural inequities and dynamics within their own community, including local educational institutions. Third, the voice of local community advocates became amplified as they found audience among the newly engaged global public. In short, the institutional racism baked into Charlottesville's public and private institutions, that for decades had so successfully resisted reform efforts, gradually became the focus of community stakeholders with newfound leverage to confront historical injustices in a post-rally context.

The local crisis in Charlottesville came to represent the national standoff between those seeking racial justice and those rankled by such calls. These global and local crises fused as major news outlets reported on the violence, demonstrations, and political accusations and recriminations. Media networks shared dramatic images from Charlottesville. Reporting

saturated the mainstream news cycle for weeks. In mainstream news and social media, President Trump's own response appeared to sympathize with the White supremacist movement and further emboldened both sides of the country's deepening sociopolitical divide. A search of Google Trends confirmed the worldwide impact of the Unite the Right rally. The terms "Charlottesville" and "White supremacy" exploded across the internet, not only in the fifty states but also in six continents. Affirming the global impact of the event one teacher reflected, "Charlottesville became a hashtag."

### ***From Local Awareness to Demands for Accountability***

Many community stakeholders experienced the initial crisis event and ensuing violence as a social trauma; one that was immediate. During the acute phase of the crisis the global narrative around racial injustice, and specifically what had occurred within Charlottesville, echoed throughout the community. Absorbing the global narrative and experiencing the acute crisis in real time, advocates within the community publicly demanded that public organizations be accountable to changing global dynamics and norms around race and racial equity. These community members and activists planted the seeds for a *paracrisis* and, ultimately, a *crisis of challenge*.

Using their prominent positions within local society, several established Charlottesville activists challenged the Charlottesville power structure for its history of systemic racism that was, by and large, left intact for decades. As recounted by a NYT investigative reporter, leveraging local and national media interest in the racial upheaval playing out in Charlottesville, these advocates pushed local institutions to take a public anti-racist stance. In the words of one council member, "We are not ready to heal yet."

Initially, activists challenged city government and city council on several social issues including 1) removing additional statues honoring White Supremacists and 2) increasing affordable housing for Charlottesville's African American population. One longtime local activist, Nikuyah Walker, became the first African American female to serve as mayor in November 2017. As a post-crisis political leader Walker was characterized by the local establishment as "disruptive." One NYT print journalist stated, "She seems more focused on publicizing the city's sins than its successes." He continued, "Instead of squeezing a few dozen affordable housing units out of developers, she wanted to add thousands. Instead of merely providing 'implicit bias' training for police officers, she wanted an end to 'stop and frisk.'" These references in local media coverage illustrate how, on the one hand, local advocates saw an opportunity to intensify their messages of systemic racism, while on the other hand, the resistance from the community establishment maintained and even intensified.

But community stakeholders continued to challenge the political establishment from multiple angles. Advocates intensified challenges to city government and private organizations regarding locations of confederate statues and the displaying of confederate flags. Black Lives Matter and Hate Free Schools movements made their voices heard around equity-related issues. University and K-12 faculty were increasingly quoted in local media, shining a light on the history of *de facto* segregation in the public schools. High school student activists played an important role in this process. According to the NYT report, one high school student, Zyanah Bryant, raised concerns with local media regarding the school district's racist practices. Her efforts made an impact on the public consciousness through petitions, walk-outs, and a lecture series around local

manifestations of racial injustice. In an interview with *Teaching Tolerance* published on the first anniversary of Unite the Right Charlottesville, Bryant stated, “There are a lot of very deep problems that aren’t evident on the surface when looking at Charlottesville, and that has been my goal, to continue to uncover and unmask those illusions.”

Our data suggested that two high school students also began to leverage the current climate to highlight and challenge the school system’s inequitable practices. Our analysis suggested that these two students, while not solely responsible, played a critical role in taking a diffuse discussion of racial inequity and focusing it directly onto CCS. Interview data from three educational leaders suggested that they believed these students caught the attention of the New York Times, which ultimately led to the exposé on CCS. With a political context that emboldened voices traditionally oppressed, events were about to unfold that would solidify the crisis of challenge for the CSS.

### ***From Paracrisis to Crisis of Challenge***

While this crisis evolved from acute crisis to paracrisis over approximately one year, the transformation from paracrisis to crisis of challenge for the district—a direct challenge to its reputation and legitimacy—transpired seemingly overnight. However, our analysis shows how the context was set for this crisis evolution months before it erupted. Interviews and document analysis support that local activists managed to sustain the spotlight on Charlottesville—transferring a national debate on racial injustice and turning it inward on Charlottesville’s K-12 public schools. Ultimately, the power of social and traditional media sources maintained focus on the community’s misgivings, discomfort, and anger about social injustices until the district was amidst a crisis of challenge. Suddenly, the practices that sustained systemic racism in CCS were on full display in local and national media outlets such as The Washington Post, Forbes magazine, CNN, BET, among many others.

The New York Times’ exposé on the district’s history of institutional racism propelled the district into the crisis of challenge. The investigation was replete with examples of inequitable practices such as zoning and attendance practices intended to maintain intra-district segregation. At this point in the crisis’ trajectory, both local and external advocates and actors pushed to hold the district accountable for its socio-political shortcomings. Beyond the NYT’s report, local advocates began to highlight historical records, district policies and practices, and district demographic, programmatic, and achievement data as evidence of institutional values that contradicted the district’s espoused values of equity and social justice.

**Historical record as the foundation of a Crisis of Challenge.** As interviewees recounted, Charlottesville’s conditions of racism and disparity reached back to the time of Jefferson and his conflicted embrace of both freedom and slavery. Moreover, interviewees and documentary evidence supported that fact that Charlottesville’s major educational institutions—the University of Virginia and the public school system—played significant roles in institutionalizing and protecting inequity through policy and practice.

For example, one interviewee explained how, historically, the University of Virginia’s hiring practices effectively organized the town-gown community into castes—a well-resourced White intellectual class and an under-resourced Black servant population. This leader remarked, “It’s pretty typical of a university town where there are some very wealthy, very academic, very

educated students who attend the schools. And then there are also [K-12] students who live in considerable poverty. And you don't often see a lot in between." The socioeconomic and cultural divide between the two groups reached such an extreme that White Charlottesville engaged in massive resistance to school integration throughout the 1950s. In the 1960s, the city's urban renewal plan approved and carried out the razing of Charlottesville's successful African American business and residential community, Vinegar Hill (CLIHC, 2020). The national debate over Confederate statues reintroduced the Vinegar Hill destruction into the community consciousness through publications such as the NYT and Slate magazine.

**Policies and Procedures.** Additional artifacts surfaced within the community that implicated the district role in maintaining inequitable practices, such as tracking and schedule manipulation to, again, preserve *de facto* racial segregation and exacerbate opportunity gaps between students of different races. For example, practices around gifted education came under intense scrutiny. As one district leader stated, "many White students were being pulled out, and not just gifted students" as they reflected on the lack of gifted education opportunities for many students of color. The increased attention on gifted education led to the discovery by district personnel of archival evidence supporting the use of the program to maintain segregation during the 1950s. Dr. Atkins reflected in one interview, "Many school districts start this in kindergarten... And it is so ingrained and so institutionalized in our schooling process that it is almost invisible."

Master scheduling procedures proved to be another threat to the district's legitimacy during the crisis of challenge. Charlottesville's schedules had allowed students to be placed in below grade-level classes or grouped homogeneously by reading ability, according to Dr. Atkins. Tracked scheduling meant many minority students were unable to access the school's fine arts, engineering, and foreign language courses. Since administrators have pursued "de-leveling" and the removal of such structural barriers post-October 2018, these diverse students have flocked to the once restricted courses, according to the superintendent.

Finally, the NYT investigation highlighted the district's achievement data and persistent disparity of academic opportunities and outcomes based on race. As the report underscored, White students tended to outperform Black students on most subjects and by at least two grade levels. While Dr. Atkins challenged these data as too narrow to reflect student experiences and growth more broadly, the NYT's exposé had successfully leveraged district data to make the case that the district's efforts at social justice have fallen short. The reporters drew upon socioeconomic data, state performance data, and federal civil rights data to establish Charlottesville's over-representation of African American students in school discipline and under-representation in Advanced Placement and enrichment courses. From the article:

Today, white students make up 40 percent of Charlottesville's enrollment, and African American students about a third. But White children are about four times as likely to be in Charlottesville's gifted program, while Black students are more than four times as likely to be held back a grade and almost five times as likely to be suspended from school.

Finally, the NYT's report further fueled the crisis of challenge by giving weight to the voices and experiences of heretofore ignored local advocates. Student activists sat at the center of its reporting. Through their narratives, these activists came to represent the experience of other minoritized students.

In short, this case illustrates how a global crisis can reverberate through the system creating new crises—in this case a crisis of challenge. Activists' calls for justice around structural

racism in the schools had gone unheeded for decades. Yet, a global crisis of reckoning around race, coupled with a timely national report “moved the needle” compelling educational leaders and stakeholders to confront decades of injustice.

### **Leadership Actions: Trauma versus Learning Responses**

As our data above illustrated, crises can often create new, different, and unexpected crises. The initial crisis of trauma and subsequent crisis of challenge facing CPS demanded myriad leadership skill sets and knowledge. This section presents our analysis of Dr. Atkins’ differing approaches during each of these phases. We discuss her focus on addressing immediate needs and effective communication during the initial crisis, and then we discuss the shift to strategies focusing on acknowledgement, community self-reflection, and discovery during the crisis of challenge.

#### ***Acute Crisis of Trauma and a Leader’s Response***

The rally of August 2017 was an abrupt and destabilizing trauma to the community, including the school district community. The event’s shock shifted the beginning of the academic year’s focus from education to safety, security, and healing. In short, the crisis was perceived as an external threat—something to survive and overcome. Our data show that at this early crisis point the superintendent focused specifically on 1) issues related to the district community’s physical safety, 2) staff and students’ emotional and mental health support, and 3) communication that clarified district values to internal and external communities.

**Prioritizing Safety.** Superintendent Atkins made several decisions regarding the safety of stakeholders in the immediate aftermath of the August demonstrations. She indicated the importance of attempting to maintain some normal routines for students, while also prioritizing safety and security. For example, freshman orientation proceeded on Monday, August 14th. The district leadership team was anxious to start the school year to pull students away from street demonstrations. As one district level interviewee stated, “[District personnel] were trying to take care of their night crew. They had freshmen coming in. And they had students who were actually participating in the protests....” In another decision aimed at maximizing safety, Atkins moved a family welcome event from the downtown amphitheater to a more remote location. Dr. Atkins also increased security at each school, even arranging additional security at night to protect custodial staff.

She also made less obvious security decisions. For example, Atkins rejected repeated requests by political groups and media sources to use the school facilities as their bases of operation, isolating the school district from emerging partisan politics. “She didn’t want to allow our schools to be used by anyone... to help protect teachers and not get political,” recalled one leader. According to district stakeholders we interviewed, the superintendent’s prioritization of their physical safety was a significant aspect of her crisis response early on. As one district leader mentioned, “It goes without saying that people would think of safety first... But with everything that went down in August of 2017 [Dr. Atkins] always took student and faculty safety as paramount.”

**Focus on Stakeholder Support.** Data suggest that an immediate focus on safety through district wide gatherings had a supportive effect on teachers. The superintendent’s openness and

vulnerability instilled a “we’re all in this together” trust with her staff. One teacher recalled how she felt at the convocation:

I remember the way it felt, and it was goosebumpy. And I remember that people were there supporting each other, and it was ‘we will not be defined by this moment.’ But we also need to heal.

Another district stakeholder reflected that because the year began this way, with vulnerability and a supportive community, teachers were able to express their stress and exhaustion as the difficult year continued. The overall sentiment in our data reflected appreciation and approval of the superintendent and her support at that stage as one teacher said, “It was her finest hour.”

Having addressed the emotional needs of faculty, she turned her attention toward students. At her direction, the district compiled and shared resources with families. Teams of counselors, both school counselors and clinical professionals, established open clinics in the first days of school. Leadership encouraged teachers to talk with students, especially secondary students, about their experiences. One student remarked, “I remember first day of school on the morning announcements, maybe like the first thing was that counselors and teachers and people will be in the library during lunch, or any time and we encourage you to come talk to us.... We knew those resources were available.”

**Values Communication.** Finally, throughout the early crisis stage, Atkins communicated the organization’s values and expectations in response to the crisis event. Her initial crisis communication came on Sunday immediately following the Unite the Right Rally. The superintendent sent a letter to the broader community including faculty and staff, parents, and local media. The letter was a collaboration with a Superintendent from an adjacent school district. The superintendents wrote of their sadness and mourning, and they denounced racism and hatred. They pledged their organizations’ ongoing commitment to “establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.” The letter represented an early and unified voice against racism and was shared directly with faculty, staff, and parents.

However, while the letter no doubt reflected the superintendents’ personal beliefs and leadership stances, it also foreshadowed a grand irony inherent in the district’s history. That is, while the communication effectively positioned the district in opposition to the White Supremacist movement, it could not erase the district’s own history of institutional racism that would entangle it as the crisis evolved.

On Monday, August 14<sup>th</sup>, one day later, Atkins used the district-wide convocation to share her response to the event. A clear example of calculated intervention, Atkins chose to change the focus and format of the event. She recounted that in the morning’s leadership team meeting, her colleagues advised her to diverge from the new school year celebration. They reoriented the event toward addressing the collective stress of a grieving community. Later that day the event was delivered in a subdued manner to suit the meeting’s new purpose. In an interview, the superintendent shared that she chose to dress casually, yet respectfully, and she addressed the district community without a podium.

Her message expressed her own grief and feelings of shock and resolve. She told the stakeholders, “Our organization would stand for love, and anyone unprepared to embrace diversity had no role to play in [the district].” One district teacher leader’s comment reflected the general sentiment in our interview data:

She made some very direct statements that if you were racist, if you are anti-certain religions, if you were anti-people who speak certain languages, if you are against LGBTQ, then you were not welcome in our school system. Because that's not who we are. And I remember her saying that very directly and I thought, well good for her....We can't be the educators in our school system if we aren't united on that front.

The superintendent's early actions reflect the responses one would expect from an external threat that, in this case, was not only politically and socially troubling, but also violent. The actions taken reflect an adherence to well considered and rehearsed crisis management plans, but also speak to the leadership acumen of Dr. Atkins. Students had access to counselors. The buildings transformed into safe havens. Faculty felt unified and motivated to pursue their work, trusting the intentions of administration.

But, as with any complex undertaking, stakeholders identified opportunity for improvement. For example, one district leader stated the superintendent might have delivered her values messaging more directly to students. Another mentioned how more support staff might have participated in the convocation event. But as stakeholders reflected on Atkins' leadership in the aftermath of the "Unite the Right" rally, they did find it successful. One leader mentioned, "I'm sure there were some mistakes, but I can't imagine us doing it any other way."

For all the positive actions taken, and the limited areas for improvement, this case study stands out for how the crisis evolved over a year's time causing the superintendent to draw on a completely different crisis skill set—one not laid out in any crisis management plan. Anti-racist proclamations could not deflect the incriminating evidence of the district's complicity in the institutional racism that the demonstrators sought to maintain.

### ***Secondary Crisis: Organizational Learning***

As we detailed earlier, the crisis facing CCS morphed from one of acute trauma to a crisis of challenge focused squarely on district practices promoting racial inequality. This secondary crisis called on leadership less focused on stabilizing and recovery, and more on learning and transformation. Below, we present examples of Dr. Atkins' approach to this crisis of challenge.

**Democratic Processes.** First, democratic processes allowed Atkins to collect and consolidate the swell of critical sentiment that surfaced with the NYT exposé. These inclusive practices gave voice to minoritized and traditionally marginalized stakeholders and signaled her commitment to organizational change. Specifically, Atkins set up a formal structure for soliciting ideas, thoughts, and opinions about the inequities inherent in the CPS system. Through these structures the district hosted forums, convened committees, and embraced student advocacy.

District leadership completed a series of 15 public forums over three months held at community centers across the district. One school administrator commented on Dr. Atkins' approach to these sometimes-contentious meetings:

How do you work a room of several hundred people who are all pissed off at you? How do you navigate that conversation week after week with people coming to school board meetings and hollering at you about how everything's working? And I think Dr. Atkins does it with a steady hand, with a calm hand... She was able to put her armor on and go take care of business.

Atkins also directed these democratic activities toward students. Students were invited to attend forums. And when student groups developed lists of demands and submitted petitions, or when they organized walkouts, the Superintendent allowed these demonstrations and included their demands into conversations about district transformation.

Perhaps most importantly, Dr. Atkins intentional structure for democratic inclusivity extended beyond initial information gathering to include permanent, long-term organizational structures. To wit, after months of public listening she convened a district-level equity committee to formally process the public feedback and issue recommendations. This group of 33 stakeholders produced a ranked list of recommendations that was incorporated into the district's strategic plan. Meanwhile, public outreach continued as part of the district's routine activities. Equity committees began to operate at each school, and concerns voiced within school communities had a formal structure to communicate with district leadership. One teacher commented on the new structure, "I think that is a big improvement where people feel like, not only can I have a voice, but there's a structure to carry that voice."

**Historical Auditing.** Finally, Dr. Atkins used the crisis of challenge as leverage to make changes and have discussions around race and the district's historical transgressions in the name of equity. In a process we label "historical auditing," Atkins compelled district personnel to surface the contradictions inherent in the organization's historical values (evidenced through policies and practices) versus the values represented in the post-crisis paradigm. We present just two examples that illustrate how the district reexamined and rewrote a more accurate history of the past to establish a more equity-oriented future.

First, Atkins confronted CCS historical narratives that hid injustice and ignored efforts to desegregate. For example, she challenged the district's social studies department to "change the narrative" by teaching local history around race and justice more accurately. With her encouragement, the district's social studies curriculum was revised to honestly consider stories of resistance to school integration alongside stories such as the first African American students to integrate CCS known as the Charlottesville 12. Through the social studies curriculum, social media, and ceremonies, Dr. Atkins led the effort to acknowledge these types of historical struggles in the district.

In another example, Dr. Atkins encouraged stakeholders to research the district's past policies and practices. During research on the district's gifted program Dr. Atkins and a teacher discovered a 1958 letter from a concerned citizen among school board records. The letter advocated using gifted identification protocols to maintain de facto racial segregation. The letter's discovery could not have been timelier, as the gifted program had been the focus of criticism for its lack of services for students of color. As Atkins stated, "For me reading that letter, it felt like and sounded like that was the genesis of the Gifted program that we had evolved in Charlottesville City Schools." In fact, she used this letter to connect the past to the present as she held formal conversations with colleagues, community stakeholders, and scholars about institutional racism in the district. Dr. Atkins explained, "I decided that I would not use it as a hammer, but as a tool for educating. And I decided in our community, in our school district, that I just could not rest until we dismantled this [gifted] program." Dr. Atkins referred to the letter directly when, in spring 2019, she put a moratorium on the pull-out delivery of gifted services. Her elevation of this historical artifact opened a new series of meetings and debate, evident in local press coverage. From the *Daily Progress* newspaper, "Atkins faced backlash for requesting

\$620,000 from the city out of the normal budgeting cycle to hire eight gifted specialists to strengthen changes to the program.” The emotional resistance to change from parents of some gifted students only stoked the superintendent’s stronger conviction that all students deserved the academic enrichment opportunities gifted programming provides. Fully committed to district transformation, Atkins used historical auditing to advance organizational learning in a post-crisis context.

## Discussion and Conclusions

Considered against the backdrop of the crisis literature presented earlier, our findings suggest important lessons for scholars studying crises and the districts and school leaders who live through them. Our case study illustrates and builds upon important critical crisis literature that underscores crises as complex, multi-faceted, and social phenomena (e.g., Coombs & Halladay, 2012). Specifically, the CCS case underscores that leaders should expect crises to be dynamic, complex, and multi-dimensional (Ren, 2000). These traits call into question the utility of crisis management plans that focus on 3-stage models of acute, and traditionally conceptualized crises (e.g., Fink, 1986). The CCS case illustrates complexity in multiple ways. We see how a crisis external to an organization can cause, in this instance, a school district to pivot temporarily away from its education mission to a focus on safety and healing. In this regard, the crisis’ impact—whether originating externally or internally—was acute and relatively tangible. In short, these are the types of crises most management plans are designed to address.

But this case, more importantly builds on the crisis literature that focuses on complexity. While the external Unite the Right rally created an acute crisis for CCS, it also set the stage for, first, a paracrisis and, second, a crisis of challenge. Especially in today’s hyper-connected world, educational leaders must be cognizant of social forces that, not too long ago, may never have materialized. Incorporating the concept of the paracrisis into crisis management plans will support consideration of socially manufactured crises propelled by social media and other means of communication that are digitally accelerated. Using the keystone concepts of paracrisis—power, legitimacy, and urgency—educational leaders will be better situated to assess potential crises.

Further, important lessons for educational leaders faced with growing onslaughts driven by social media, is how, and why, the CCS crisis continued to evolve from acute crisis, to paracrisis, and ultimately a crisis of challenge. As the superintendent was aware, a history of institutional racism was fertile ground for an evolving and changing crisis, especially given the genesis of the initial crisis. In this case study, the paracrisis pointing to the district’s complicity in institutionally racist practices gained traction precisely because those accusations toward the district were 1) *powerful* and influential, 2) *legitimate* to stakeholders beyond those earlier initiators, and 3) *urgent* given the nature of the claims and evidence supporting them.

Finally, the role of leadership stands out in the CCS case study. The superintendent played a critical role in acknowledging the transformation of an acute crisis into what became a crisis of challenge, i.e., a challenge to the legitimacy of the school district and its capacity to carry out its mission. Where in the district’s past, transformational change away from institutional racism and toward equity were met with strong resistance, Dr. Atkins was able to leverage the *crisis of*

*challenge* to make substantive changes regarding organizational policy, practice and ultimately culture.

In summary, this case study underscores the need to consider the complex nature of crises and their varied impacts on schools and districts. Crises come in many forms—natural, social, economic, etc. And initial crises can lead to successive crises across time and space. But, in addition, crises can lead create conditions for and instigate new, seemingly, different, and unrelated crises. The CCS case provides an example of how an acute crisis can lead to a relatively new source of crisis—the *paracrisis*. While district leaders may have experienced paracrises in practice, it is important to be informed about this source of potential crisis driven by media and social media in our hyperconnected world.

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# How do Community College Leaders Learn Leadership? A Mixed Methods Study on Leadership Learning Experiences

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*The need for community college leadership development is pressing due to impending retirements and leadership vacancies. To better understand how leaders develop leadership skills and aptitudes, this explanatory sequential mixed-methods study aimed to examine perceptions of community college administrators' leadership learning experiences. The study involved first collecting quantitative data through descriptive survey responses and then explaining these results with qualitative interview data from current community college administrators. In alignment with the theoretical framework focusing on social and experiential learning, this study's findings reveal that learning occurs through a variety of means and experiences within one's environment. When new concepts or skills are related to previous experiences and learning, this assists with learning those new concepts and skills. Results suggest that leadership is a learnable skill, experiences are key to learning leadership, and leadership development programs can integrate experiential learning more intentionally into their curricula. Further research is needed to determine the effectiveness of educational programs for community college leaders working in increasingly complex contexts.*

**Keywords:** community college leadership; leadership professional development; leadership education; experiential learning; Kolb and leadership

The need for community college leadership development is pressing. The impending retirement of many current higher-level community college administrators poses a risk for gaps in community college functionality (Artis & Bartel, 2021; Campbell et al., 2010; Hull & Keim, 2007). This has been deemed an impending leadership crisis brought on by retirements and leadership vacancies (Appadurai, 2009; Chen, 2020; Forthun & Freeman, 2017), creating a need for new and effective leaders to step into these roles (Eddy, 2013). The effect of these vacancies is compounded by the fact that the average tenure of community college presidents is lower than the average president's tenure at other higher education institutions (Eddy & Garza Mitchell, 2017; Phillippe, 2016), recently reaching an all-time low of 6.5 years (Gagliardi et al., 2017). Additionally, although internal hires have been the dominant model for leadership succession in community colleges (Amey et al., 2002; Eddy & Boggs, 2010), many potential Chief Academic Officer (CAO) candidates within universities are also close to retirement or do not desire to be CAOs because of the increasing demands of the job (Jones & Johnson, 2014). While there is an increasingly diverse pool of potential CAO candidates, the increased demands on diverse CAOs, especially women of color, create more challenges for diverse candidates seeking CAO positions (Braxton, 2018; Delgado & Ozuna Allen, 2019).

These growing leadership vacancies, combined with the need for efficacy and equity in leadership succession, have led to an increasing demand for adjustments to community college leadership development initiatives (Calareso, 2013; Moustafa, 2016; Wallin, 2006). Specifically, initiatives to develop community college leadership competencies, build teams, develop organizational talent, and increase individual ability to lead under pressure are essential to community college success (Artis & Bartel, 2021; Moldoveanu & Narayandas, 2019). To meet this growing demand for skilled leaders, further research about how community college leaders develop leadership is required. Since the financial crisis of 2008-2009, finances at community colleges have changed, and increased national emphasis has been focused on community colleges as suppliers of qualified workers (Eddy & Garza Mitchell, 2017; Eddy et al., 2019). Previous studies, such as Brown et al.'s (2002) study of community college leaders' perceptions of their preparation for leadership roles provided by their doctoral programs, merit revisiting in the contemporary context. This study seeks to fill the gap in the literature on perceptions of leadership learning for this contemporary moment, as people's beliefs in their abilities to learn can influence their abilities to learn skills and concepts (Yin & Yuan, 2021). The purpose of this explanatory sequential mixed-methods study was to examine perceptions of community college administrators' leadership learning experiences. The study involved first collecting quantitative data and then explaining the quantitative results with in-depth qualitative data to address the following research question: What are community college administrator participants' perceptions of leadership learning?

## **Literature Review**

The existing literature highlights various methods through which leadership is typically learned. Leadership workshops and seminars, internships and shadowing, mentorship from senior administrators, coaching, networking, collaborations, and formal learning systems, such as graduate programs, are common avenues for imparting leadership competencies (Channing,

2020; Elmuti et al., 2005; Hull & Keim, 2007; Strom et al., 2011). Modern studies on effective community college leader preparation have supported an increased focus on teaching practical skills and real-life contextualized problem-solving (Eddy & Garza Mitchell, 2017; Sullivan & Palmer, 2014; Amey, 2006). Gilbert et al. (2018), Mann et al. (2015), Storey & Cox (2015), and Voelkel et al. (2016) have made cases for using immersive virtual simulations as case studies to increase the personalized learning and problem-solving that educational leaders need to address 21<sup>st</sup>-century issues. Voelkel et al. (2016) argued that the job-embedded, experiential learning employed by some graduate programs has proven ineffective due to inconsistencies and a lack of pedagogical intentionality. The literature has also emphasized that leadership development and graduate programs can help to nurture self-confidence; self-control; emotional intelligence; and a level of knowledge of one's vision, values, and emotions (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Dagen et al., 2022; Goleman, 2004), which may be valuable in matching leader candidates to community college contexts that are good fits (Amey, 2006).

Studies have focused on evaluating the need for professional development for community college administrators (Boggs & McPhail, 2016; Eddy, 2010; Martin, 2021) or describing the need to increase the number of individuals in the leadership pipeline at community colleges (Eddy, 2013; Piland & Wolf, 2003b; Wrighten, 2018). Most studies also suggest that leadership is best learned through leadership-focused activities rather than formal education programs (Eddy & Boggs, 2010; Goleman, 2004; Polanyi, 1958; Raines & Alberg, 2003). More specifically, the excessive focus on explicit knowledge at the expense of tacit knowledge makes leadership programs ineffective (Amey, 2006; Eddy & Garza Mitchell, 2017; Elmuti et al., 2005; Hammons & Miller, 2006; Polanyi, 1958). Many formal leadership programs primarily emphasize theory and research, leaving graduates insufficiently prepared for the practical demands of leadership roles (Brown & Posner, 2001; Elmuti et al., 2005; Piland & Wolf, 2003b). Wallin (2006) found that, despite often being necessary for obtaining a presidency, doctoral leadership degrees are not always indicative of leadership skill acquisition. However, some scholars have argued for the importance of graduate programs in preparing top-level administrators for their roles (Artis & Bartel, 2021), as such programs may be crucial in understanding the specifics of community college leadership, such as policy, planning, budgets, and law (Channing, 2020; Hull & Keim, 2007). Strom et al. (2011) asserted that there is a need for substantial continuing leadership education and short-term development opportunities. Eddy and Garza Mitchell (2017) argued that it is essential to focus leadership development on networked leadership rather than "hero leaders," which requires extending professional development opportunities to a broader scale of leaders within an organization, not just those in positions traditionally considered as leadership roles.

Community college presidents' have suggested the following for community college leadership graduate programs: using realistic case studies, providing flexible programs, recruiting community college professionals, utilizing current and former community college leaders' expertise, and applying learning to regional contexts or community colleges (Hammons & Miller, 2006; Brown et al., 2002). These presidents underscored the importance of leadership training and specialized professional development on finance, marketing, fundraising, equity and inclusion issues, student success and persistence, political considerations, and public relations (Hammons & Miller, 2006). In a study on community college presidents in Oklahoma, Vargas (2013) posited that the most pressing issues facing community college leaders, including working

with funding and communication, relate to the president's awareness of and skill at working within the political realm.

This study's findings address the gap in the community college leadership literature about learning leadership competencies in the contemporary context, as much of the literature on community college leadership learning predates contemporary contextual influences that have significantly changed the pressures that community college leaders face. These issues include state mandates, declining enrollments and funding, regional community needs, free community college, accreditation requirements, calls for accountability, COVID-19 concerns, and the needs of increasingly diverse campuses and external constituencies (AASCU, 2021; Anaya, 2018; Buckley, 2018; DeJear et al., 2018; Eddy et al., 2019; Eddy & Boggs, 2010; Jones & Johnson, 2014). Because of the complexity of community college leadership today, leadership educators need a better understanding of the methods through which community college leaders learn leadership and how this learning translates into effective leadership practices in modern community college contexts (Gillett-Karam, 1999). This study's findings suggest that leadership learning from experience, formal education, reading, mentoring, and colleagues align with Kolb's (2014) cyclical process of learning, Fenwick's (2004) co-emergent perspective, and Dewey's (1938) experiential learning model. These educative experiences lead to the development of adaptive competencies, such as the abilities to tolerate ambiguity, to think abstractly, to use flexible approaches, to think logically and critically, and to identify multiple alternative solutions.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Kolb's (2014) theorizations of experiential learning and learning processes underpin this study's theoretical framework. According to Kolb's cycle of learning, the experiential learning process includes integrating knowledge through formal learning and prior experience, engaging in activities where one applies knowledge in realistic contexts, and reflecting on knowledge to analyze and synthesize what one has learned to create new knowledge. Kolb emphasized that learning is best conceived as a process, not an outcome, and ideas are not fixed but shaped and modified through experiences. Learning results as individuals resolve conflicts between opposing ways of understanding the world. Learning also involves the individuals' thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving as they adapt to the social world and interact with their environment. In line with Kolb's description of experiential learning processes, participants in this study emphasize how a variety of experiences—self-directed, formal, and informal—have influenced their leadership learning. Kolb contended that learning is a holistic and adaptive process that encompasses all aspects of life throughout the lifespan. Adaptive competencies emphasize creativity, critical and logical thinking, decision-making, seeking alternative solutions, problem-solving, and even scientific research.

Fenwick's (2004) co-emergent perspective reimagined the experiential learning cycle, arguing that experience, reflecting, thinking, and acting are inseparable rather than sequential. She suggested that individuals' experiences can only be known to them through socially available meanings. Thus, meaning-making—or the development of what Kolb called adaptive competencies—takes place within and is shaped and limited by “systems of culture, history, social relations and nature” (p. 49). Participants' learning happened within systems, and their perceptions reflect the ways of knowing available to them within these systems.

Although participants frequently discussed formal and informal leadership learning, it is crucial to recognize, as Dewey (1938) contended in *Experience and Education*, there are multiple issues with theories or philosophies of education that adhere to “Either-Ors” (p. 1). Dewey pointed out that:

the history of educational theory is marked by opposition between the idea that education is development from within and that it is formation from without; that it is based upon natural endowments and that education is a process of overcoming natural inclination and substitution in its place habits acquired under external pressure. (p. 1)

In other words, learning cannot be reduced to a dichotomous model of education from informal and formal experiences. Learning occurs within one’s environment through a variety of means and experiences. New concepts and skills are learned with the assistance of their relationships to previous experience and learning. Importantly, as cited throughout the literature on social theories of learning, experiential learning includes social learning, such as learning related to observation (Bandura, 1971); models (Bandura, 1971); positive and negative reinforcement (Bandura, 1986; Bandura et al., 1961); and individual characteristics related to self-efficacy and motivation (Bandura, 1993; Lim & Kim, 2003; Song, 2005).

## Methods

The purpose of this explanatory sequential mixed-methods study was to examine perceptions of community college administrators’ leadership learning experiences. After securing IRB approval, the study involved collecting descriptive quantitative data and then explaining the quantitative results with in-depth qualitative data. In the quantitative phase of the study, during 2019, I developed a 13-item descriptive survey. The survey items were open-ended questions about leadership learning and the participants’ backgrounds. The survey was administered to faculty, staff, and administrators at educational institutions across the United States to examine perceptions of leadership learning, leadership challenges, and leadership styles. Nearly 150 participants responded to the survey (Channing, 2020). This current study focuses exclusively on the community college administrators’ responses (n = 68) to this survey. In the initial descriptive survey, participants reported that they thought leadership is a learnable skill, that it is often learned through on-the-job experiences and models/mentors, and that leadership professional development is only valuable under particular conditions, such as when the instructors have significant first-hand leadership experience.

The qualitative phase was conducted in 2020 as a follow-up to the quantitative results to help explain and validate survey results. Utilizing pragmatic and dialectic validation methods described by Harris and Brown (2010) and Fila et al. (2015), I systematically compared survey response themes with those themes present in interview transcripts and asked similar questions in the follow-up interviews as in the survey instrument. This comparative and iterative approach revealed consistent themes across the survey and interview responses. In this exploratory follow-up, I interviewed twelve community college administrators from across the U.S. to better understand perceptions of leadership learning, navigation of politics and human relations, and communication strategies in community college contexts (Channing, 2021). Participants were recruited based on expressed interest in participating in future research on the quantitative survey instrument and through snowball sampling, whereby one participant recommended

another. Purposeful and expert sampling was used to identify participants who met the inclusion criteria (e.g., U.S. community college administrators) and could provide meaningful and rich data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Upon reaching saturation, a stage at which no new insights were provided by participants as recognized through initial coding, I ceased sampling and interviewing (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Interviews were transcribed by secure third-party software and then checked for accuracy by re-listening to interview audio recordings. Two research assistants and I coded the transcripts using first- and second-order coding methods, whereby we derived fewer and more distinct codes through re-coding transcripts (Saldaña, 2016). We then compared codes and derived themes from these codes related to leadership learning and professional development. Using multiple coders and researchers to analyze material, I was able to ensure intercoder reliability and notice patterns in codes that eventually assisted in developing emergent themes across transcripts (MacPhail et al., 2016). These themes included experiential learning, bad examples/negative experiences, formal education, reading, mentoring, and colleagues. As recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2018), I kept a journal and memoed, as well as provided thick description to ensure trustworthiness and bracketed transcripts to mitigate bias. I define my positionality through intersectional identities: a person with multiple ethnicities who is genderqueer, from a working-class background, currently a middle-class professional, and a current higher education academic leader. By bracketing my thoughts and perceptions and member-checking, I sought to mitigate and be aware of my biases, often related to my positionality. For example, I frequently discussed my own leadership learning from experience in my notes and how this may influence my development of codes and themes. Also, I could relate to the leaders' challenges in navigating power and politics in the community college context and was attuned to their navigational and leadership strategies. I used member-checking whereby participants gave feedback on responses and analyses, which enriched the overall study process and descriptions. This process enabled me to discern whether participants felt analyses and interpretations were accurate and to make needed revisions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Quantitative Survey Results**

#### ***Participants***

Results were derived from an initial descriptive quantitative study on leadership teaching and learning (Channing, 2020). These results focus on the portion of the survey sample who identified as community college administrators. Sixty-eight community college administrators participated in this survey. The majority (91%) of participants were 40 years of age or older. The majority (60.29%) identified as women, and 39.71% identified as men. Most (83.33%) participants identified as white, while 7.58% identified as African American/Black and 12.12% identified as other racial/ethnic categories.

#### ***Leadership Learning***

Table 1 illustrates that the majority (86.8%) of the community college administrators surveyed indicated that they perceived that leadership could be taught. In comparison, 8.8% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 4.4% indicated that leadership cannot be taught.

**Table 1**  
*Leadership can be Taught*

	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	18	26.5
Agree	41	60.3
Neither agree nor disagree	6	8.8
Disagree	3	4.4
Strongly Disagree	0	0

### ***Open-ended Responses***

In open-ended responses, community college administrators reported that leadership learning occurs most frequently through mentorship, experience, trial and error, innate/natural traits, formal education/professional development, and observation of leaders (positive and negative examples). Participants indicated that leaders needed to develop improved people skills, listening skills, communication practices, ethical practices, collaborative abilities, change management skills, self-reflection, and abilities to navigate organizational cultures. Participants underscored the need for leaders to avoid ego-driven behaviors and attitudes. Participants recommended many strategies for leaders to develop effective leadership skills. They suggested mentoring programs, informal mentoring, leadership conferences/seminars, leadership style assessment questionnaires, formal education such as leadership degrees, the study of scenario/case studies, communication-focused workshops, and conflict resolution workshops. Some participants reported that leadership cannot be learned, with one saying:

I don't know that leadership can be 'learned.' Some people just have an inherent, unteachable quality that makes people want to follow them. I believe that people can have role models and try to mimic leadership behavior and qualities but may not ultimately have the innate qualities that make them a true leader.

However, the majority reported that leadership can be learned and shared the ways that leadership education had manifested itself in their current work. They perceived the leadership professional development they had completed resulted in improved skills related to communication, working with people, basic leadership, decision-making, and self-reflection. For example, one participant mentioned of their leadership education that “these opportunities have helped me to create a more positive environment, collaborate more often, and delegate responsibilities as needed.” Participants also suggested that leadership professional development helped them to see the “bigger picture” and to become open to diverse ideas, thinking abstractly and critically, and identifying multiple solutions to problems. Although many

reported leadership professional development as helpful, several participants claimed that leadership education did not help. One participant said, “The classes provided little value as none of the instructors had actually led a complex organization.”

The participants’ open-ended responses reflect elements of Kolb’s (2014) experiential learning process, especially regarding the continuous nature of their learning of leadership skills. The responses include “experiences” as an explicit category. However, the other identified means of learning leadership—mentorship, trial and error, formal education, and observation—are distinct types of experiences that Kolb would recognize as leading to relearning through the application, reflection, and creation of new knowledge and that Fenwick (2004) would recognize as inseparable activities leading to learning. For example, the participants’ identification of mentorship both as a means through which they had learned and as a strategy for developing more effective leadership skills aligns with Kolb’s (2014), Dewey’s (1938), and Bandura’s (1986) suggestion that learning involves integrating prior knowledge with new knowledge gained in realistic, social contexts. Further, like these participants, Dewey (1938) and Bandura (1971) recognized that learning occurs through interactions with one’s environment and includes internal and external processes and formal and informal learning experiences.

Participant descriptions of the skills leaders need, as well as the behaviors and attitudes they should avoid such as negativity and egotism, demonstrate Kolb’s (2014) concept of abstract conceptualization. Participants are developing their concept of a leader by integrating their observations, concrete transactions, and reflections into new understandings of what makes a “good” or “effective” leader. This “good leader” is often framed as collaborative, communicative, wise fiscally, and savvy politically. As Fenwick (2004) explained, these conceptualizations emerge from the knowledge about leadership available to participants at any given time: the more knowledge and experiences available, the more meaning the participants can make. These understandings of leadership also emphasize the need to adapt to circumstances and environments, and poor examples often reveal maladaptive or ineffective behaviors or strategies (Richards, 2012).

## **Qualitative Study Results**

Participants in the initial quantitative study reported that leadership can be taught and that they were able to develop in several critical leadership competency areas, such as communication and human relations, which were also reported as areas where leaders tend to need improvement. The purpose of the qualitative study was to determine the validity of the survey results through comparative analysis and to better understand the ways community college administrators learn to lead, communicate, and navigate human relations and politics in their contexts.

### ***Participants***

Twelve community college administrators were purposefully sampled in the qualitative phase of the study. They were interviewed between February 2020 and September 2020. Nine participants were presidents; two were vice presidents, and one was a director. Five participants identified as women and seven as men. Two identified as black, and ten identified as white.

Participants had an average of 26 years of higher education leadership experience. Broad descriptions and vague identifiers are used to protect participants' confidentiality.

**Research Question: What are community college administrator participants' perceptions of leadership learning?**

Ultimately, Kolb (2014) argued that learning occurs in all settings and throughout all stages of human life, expressed through adaptive abilities. Participants' responses indicated a variety of forms of leadership learning with some being self-directed and others being formal, such as workshops and graduate programs. These themes reveal the importance of adaptation in leadership development. For example, adaptive abilities include open-mindedness, the ability to contend with ambiguity, think abstractly and critically, be flexible, and evaluate multiple alternative solutions (Kolb, 2014). These manners of thinking and abilities align with Fenwick's extension of Kolb and others' work on experiential learning. Fenwick (2004) contended that "the crucial conceptual shift of an embodied experiential learning is from a learning subject to the larger collective, to the systems of culture, history, social relations and nature in which everyday bodies, subjectivities and lives are enacted" (p. 49). In other words, Fenwick extended Kolb's experiential learning theory to encompass larger social and cultural interactions and embodied experiences, rejecting mind-body dualistic models of experiential learning. Participants' descriptions of their perceptions are grouped in this section by the five identified themes: experiential learning, bad examples/negative experiences, formal education, reading, mentoring, and colleagues.

***Experiential Learning***

During interviews, participants frequently cited experience as an important way to learn leadership skills. One participant said that learning about politics and leadership was "completely different" from his prior work experience and required "dealing with all these different groups that you never had to deal with before." Overall, he asserted, "as far as being a leader, it's experiences. ... It's dealing with people." He connected "learning how to operate with people" with "learning how to trust them to do their jobs." He asserted the importance of "who you hire and who you fire" and "keeping people on message, on mission." All of this was learned "over time but I found ... lacking from my doctorate," but these skills were "what I really need to know."

According to Kolb (2014), these concrete experiences often lead to reflection, learning about particular contexts, action based on the experience, or engagement in further observation. For example, another participant discussed the "many experiences" that helped him learn to be a leader, specifically "any number of difficult situations .... as a dean." Because he was faced with emergency situations, he learned to "handle emergencies and how [to] handle literally death and really tragic kinds of situations." However, these were just some examples of experiences that informed his leadership learning. He also learned "so much in the everyday work of trying to navigate, [especially] some of the financial and administrative metrics that are that you're really responsible for and need to be concerned about." Thus, his responses to experiences, as Kolb (2014) described, varied depending on the context, although he described learning as increasing with the level of difficulty an experience. "Life or death" experiences required a rapid learning

process and subsequent response. Fenwick (2004) described these learning experiences as evolving from “collective participation in complex systems” (p. 50). These experiences, such as navigating social networks, human relations, and typical managerial tasks, require “dynamic interaction” within social structures and micro- and macro-levels in “unpredictable and inventive” ways (p. 51).

Several participants discussed how experiences with other organizations contributed to their leadership learning. One participant discussed Girl Scouts as an early opportunity for leadership that her parents encouraged. She described her parents as making

sure that from the sixth grade on, I was really active in a lot of clubs and band, and so just putting me in positions where I had to in order as an African American young girl to stand out and really shine. I had to exhibit certain leadership characteristics so that people wouldn't suppress me.

Her parents recognized the unique challenges she would face as an African American woman and prepared her for success later in life through the encouragement of early leadership learning experiences. Kolb (2014) and Fenwick (2004) explained that learning is the transaction between an individual's traits and external circumstances or between their personal and social knowledge. The participant's early experiences with clubs, band, and Girl Scouts introduced her to social knowledge—in this case, expected leadership characteristics—that transformed her personal knowledge about how a leader behaves and what characteristics she needed to exhibit. These experiences also helped shape her learning about navigating leadership and human relations in a cultural context of systemic racism, where she would need skills to assert herself and make herself visible to be successful.

One participant emphasized that the variety of experiences and positions helped her learn leadership. “Now I have ... those titles ... so I had a heck of a lot more on my plate, [so] I had to be a better leader.” She also began to learn by observation; “that's why I was trying to look and see what people are doing [and] how people reacted to what I was doing.” Ultimately, she wanted “to see if I could actually do and say what I wanted to do as compared to just being a bully because of my title.” According to Kolb (2014), “Immediate concrete experience is the basis for observation and reflection. These observations are assimilated into a ‘theory’ from which new implications for action can be deduced.” According to Bandura (1971), modeling can happen formally or informally, occurs through observing media, and assists the learner in organizing experiential learning into “new patterns of behavior” (p. 10). This participant's experiences and observations helped her envision and reflect upon the type of leader she wanted and did not want to be. She worked toward being her ideal leader and engaging practices aligned with her concept of an ideal leader.

Leadership has supplied opportunities that he would not have otherwise had, leading to further investment in himself personally and professionally. Britzman (1998) posited that educators should interrogate that which they ignore and seek out learning opportunities that would lead to knowledge that they may initially resist. This influence was present when this participant reluctantly became a leader but later embraced the learning experience. Additionally, as Fenwick (2004) argued, individuals make meaning of their experiences with the knowledge made available to them in the system in which they are operating. The opportunity for this participant to learn more about his institution, other disciplines, and leadership provided additional knowledge from which he could create new understandings of leadership.

Leadership learning from other contexts was often transferable. A participant described transferring leadership learning from the military to the higher education context. He reported: It was transferable to those who have never served tend to think it's autocratic organization, and it really is not because ... you don't have to be autocratic. So the military. A lot of the learning and education I received there transferred into the skill set I needed here. Now, there are some things I had to pick up when I transition to a new type of environment where because yeah, I know you'll be surprised to hear this, because you tell somebody this is what they have to do doesn't mean they're going to do it.

Kolb (2014) posits that as individuals' learning develops through experience, they are better able to differentiate and articulate their experiences and then re-integrate them to increase their awareness and control of themselves in the world around them. This participant appears to have been able to differentiate among his experiences in a variety of contexts, resulting in a higher-level integration of these experiences to better understand his role as a leader. Following policy and procedures and basic management skills were like military requirements. However, he had to learn about leading in the community college where, due to shared governance and employee statuses, the flattened hierarchy made it less effective to simply give orders. Fenwick (2004) posited:

Experience itself is knowledge-driven and cannot be known outside socially available meanings. What is imagined to be 'experience' is rooted in social discourses which influence how problems are perceived and named, which experiences become visible, how they are interpreted, and what knowledge they are considered to yield. (p. 45)

This participant adapted military leadership skills to the community college context and learned to lead without simply giving orders, recognizing the differing social contexts and the ways to influence and persuade depending upon the context. Moreover, military leadership training assisted this participant in developing critical problem-solving skills, which he adapted to the higher education context and learned through experience that he needed to be more flexible in his approaches to managing employees and decision-making.

### ***Bad Examples and Negative Experiences***

Participants frequently described poor leadership examples as helping them to learn leadership skills. One participant shared, "I think, oddly enough, I had a lot of really poor leaders in front of me, and ... like bad teachers that helped me to become a good teacher." Another participant described bad examples or negative experiences as helping him learn leadership.

So just whatever experiences you can get, you can always use that. There's an old adage nothing bad could ever happen to a writer because when something bad happens, they use it in their story. ... Whenever you see something going wrong, I have to learn. I want to learn from their mistakes and not my mistake.

Fundamental to Kolb's (2014) theory of experiential learning is that learning is a continuous process grounded in experience. Part of this continuous process is contending with experiences that do not match expectations. Kolb claimed that it is in the "interplay between expectation and experience that learning occurs" (p. 28). In these participants' cases, it may be that they had a particular working concept of good leadership, and the examples of poor leadership experienced did not meet their expectations. Following Kolb's theory, this interplay would result in the

integration of their reflection on and observation of these poor examples into their continued learning about leadership.

The experience of being terminated shaped another participant's leadership development and learning. She perceived that this supervisor was threatened by her, leading to her termination and to her learning how to navigate politics at institutions and with superiors. "I think I am a popular leader now because... I really learned about leadership from that experience, and it was sort of midway through my career." She underscored, "So .... nothing like being terminated by your boss... to really teach you, what's important. ... So I think that was my greatest leadership lesson." In addition to interrogating what really mattered to her as a leader, this experience taught her how to navigate personalities, politics, and organizational contextual factors in ways she had not previously considered.

These two participants emphasize their negative experiences as transformative in their understanding of leadership. When considering Kolb's (2014) theory of experiential learning, their stories suggest that negative experiences, such as loss of confidence or termination, are particularly powerful concrete experiences to be turned into new conceptualizations of leadership. Bandura (1977) contended that poor models were often rejected while positive models were emulated in practice. This created greater memories of positive behavior and subsequent repetition of observed and modeled positive behaviors. These participants came to develop an understanding of leadership by rejecting negative models and adapting to social and contextual factors.

### ***Formal Education***

Several participants described formal leadership professional development programs and leadership graduate degrees. For example, one participant commented on the usefulness of coursework on leadership development in understanding their leadership style: "So that's where I learned more about the different theories, per se, to figure out what do I do, what kind of style do I thrive in." Another participant underscored that his doctorate in higher education leadership provided "a phenomenal theoretical background of what I needed to learn about the professoriate and ... how to deal with them and trends and history of higher ed." All of this was "very interesting and very useful to a point." However, the participant also emphasized that formal education could not replace experience in learning leadership. Similarly, another participant asserted:

I do think formal education does reinforce or introduce skills, qualities that one also needs because it keeps you current and knowledgeable of new skills that closely align with reality within the world that we're in. So the combination of the innate, as well as formal education gives you the complete package.

This participant underscored the importance of formal leadership learning to be at the forefront of leadership trends; however, according to this participant, part of leadership is innate, so leaders must possess both leadership education and innate skills to be effective leaders.

Whereas participants see their formal education and experience on the job as distinct, Kolb's (2014) theory of experiential learning and Dewey's philosophy of experiential education include all experiences individuals may have, regardless of whether they happen in a formal learning environment or daily living. Individuals learn and relearn from all types of experiences.

Formal education, like an on-the-job situation, offers leaders an opportunity to reflect on their experiences, develop new ways of understanding their worlds, and apply what they have learned. The formal learning programs these participants described have reshaped their other on-the-job experiences. They have reflected on and integrated concrete formal education experiences into their current understanding of leadership (their “innate” leadership) and applied this understanding to their daily work. This process—what Kolb refers to as abstract conceptualization—may be what one participant names “the full package.” This application and testing (what Kolb called “active experimentation”) lead to new educative experiences in the workplace, and the process of experiential learning continues for these participants. Dewey (1938) connected formal education learning with experiential learning that occurs outside the classroom environment, arguing that instruction that builds upon students’ experiences leads to directed growth. Directed growth, as provided by formal education, according to Dewey, should consider social conditions and seek to create meaningful and educative experiences.

### ***Reading***

Dewey (1938) saw reading as part of experiential learning, which “is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment” (p. 42). Three participants emphasized reading as important to their leadership learning and their regular activities. One participant described himself as “very non-traditional in regard to education, but I do believe many persons learn leadership or can be born as leaders and can indirectly learn critical skills, if he or she are avid readers.” Another participant described being “infatuated with ... the writings [of] Abraham Lincoln, and ... I still continue to read about leadership, and... I read about, you know, various types of leadership strategies.” A third participant reported when asked about how to learn leadership, “Read. So, they [mentors] would send me articles and things like that.” Reading, like formal education, is an experience that offers leaders an opportunity to reflect and modify their concept of leadership. The participant reading about leadership strategies is likely modifying his concept of leadership (abstract conceptualization) through the concrete experience of interacting with the text of the reading (Kolb, 2014).

### ***Mentoring***

Participants often discussed the ways mentorship helped their leadership development. The participants were directly mentored and observed by their mentors to learn the reality and the art of leadership. One participant described his mentor as “unbelievably skilled in developing relationships with people, everybody liked him,” which he described as unusual for a leader. Another participant reported, “I certainly learned a lot about budgets and revenues and things that I never would have learned any other way.” When he was a young professional, a participant learned from a mentor whose office was across the hall from him. Then he attributed his current success to “having great examples of people who were good leaders [and] not so good, and I tended to gravitate towards those folks that I thought [were] effective to serve as my mentors and that really helped shape my leadership.”

Mentors often encouraged these participants to push themselves and extend their learning to new topics and organizational units. For example, a fourth participant reported, “[My mentor exposed] me to areas outside the chief academic officers’ area, but she also trusted me to do my job, which was fantastic. Give me some general direction and trust me to do my job.” She learned from this example, saying, “that’s how I’m going to treat my folks too.” Similarly, a fifth participant described two mentors as setting “me on the path to understanding how to be an effective leader in higher education because I didn’t come out of education.” They guided her to “do a lot of different things,” such as “go to conferences and meetings. Go to the sessions. Learn as much as you can about cutting-edge work.” They also encouraged a breadth of experience, and she reported:

That allowed me to understand the scope of my responsibilities, especially when it comes to student success and completion, because I was on the student services side and then get active in these national organizations because exposure to other colleagues will help you not become stale.

### ***Colleagues***

Participants frequently reported that colleagues assisted their leadership learning. Fenwick (2004) argued that “concrete experiences do not exist separate from other life experiences, from identity, or from ongoing social networks of interaction” (p. 46). Colleagues are parts of social networks of interaction and provide similar support as mentors do without the power differentials, allowing participants to be their authentic selves while seeking advice and input to inform their decision-making and problem-solving processes. A participant reported:

So, the exposure to them has also enriched me in really important and interesting ways. So, they’ve given me great feedback. They’ve been they let me vent and they give me strategies on how to be a more effective leader because with them, I can let my hair down and just be me. So, all those things really sort of roll up into the 42 years in higher education. Most of it as leaders, because I just like a little sponge. I just want to know about leadership and what makes people effective.

Another participant described learning from colleagues across campus. He reported:

So I got to meet and build sort of a network of folks that were not necessarily just in my department or my division, but they were sort of across the campus, so I have some relationships across the institution.

Like working with mentors, these participants are guided by other colleagues with whom they test ideas and solutions and engage in reflection. Kolb (2014) described all “learning [as] a continuous process grounded in experience,” and he pointed out that this “has important educational implications” and “implies that all learning is relearning.” Although many of these participants have years of experience and formal training in leadership, they continue to seek colleagues in similar roles to assist them with their professional development, problem-solving, and reflection. Moreover, as one of the participants mentioned, assisting other colleagues provides valuable learning experiences for her as well because she learns through the process of talking through the issues that others face.

### **Implications for Research and Practice**

This study suggests several implications for practice and further research. Using experiential learning, reflective exercises, and mentoring, leadership development programs can encourage the development of adaptive competencies, such as the abilities to tolerate ambiguity, think abstractly, use flexible approaches, think logically and critically, and identify multiple alternative solutions. Leadership professional development and degree programs have opportunities to integrate more “real world” or contextual learning experiences into their curricula, such as through internships and to utilize mentors within their programs and as parts of experiential learning. Mentoring is essential for community college leader candidates from historically excluded groups, such as Women and people of color (Braxton, 2018; Delgado & Ozuna Allen, 2019). Although Piland and Wolf (2003a) argued that “on-the-job training was, and still often is, unorganized and entirely dependent on the aggressiveness of the individual administrator or faculty leader and the opportunities that present themselves” (p. 94), leadership development and graduate programs can organize these more intentionally so that participants’ growth areas are aligned with internships or other experiential learning opportunities. Mentors who are practicing leaders in their fields can guide leadership experiential learning, assisting aspiring leaders as they identify growth areas and experiences that lead to growth in these identified areas. Additionally, mentors from diverse professional backgrounds can assist mentees by providing an interdisciplinary perspective on issues leaders face (Raines & Alberg, 2003). For leadership programs that include experiential learning, further research is needed to learn how experiential learning impacts career trajectories and leadership skills development. Overall, further research is needed on the effectiveness of leadership degrees and professional development programs and ways to attract those with leadership potential to engage in leadership preparation.

### **Conclusions**

Participants reported that leadership is a learnable rather than simply an innate trait. Participants in their quantitative survey and qualitative interview responses underscored the importance of leadership learning through experiences. They reported that they learned from on-the-job experience and observation of other leaders. They learned about leadership from both positive and negative examples and experiences. Mentors also played essential roles in these participants’ leadership development. Mentors scaffolded participants’ development of specific skills through exposure to experiences that provided growth in key areas that would increase their marketability as leaders. Participants emphasized in qualitative interviews and survey responses that they learned to avoid negative leadership behaviors such as hubris and bullying from observing other leaders who engaged in these behaviors. Further, interviews and survey data indicated that leaders needed to develop effective communication, human relations/personnel management, and fiscal management skills. These are critical areas for leadership professional development and degree programs to target through experiential learning exercises, reflective practices, mentoring, and direct instruction.

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# Utilizing a Coherent Sequence of Observations to Restructure the Principal Practicum

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*Using research-based practices a principal preparation program located in Texas restructured its practicum activities. Funded by a research grant, sponsored by Academic Partnerships, three coherently sequenced field activities, were developed and mandated as part of the practicum. These activities were performed by principal preparation candidates on school campuses and archived using video recordings. The video recordings were asynchronously observed and evaluated by certified university field supervisors. Upon completion of the evaluation, individual feedback, coaching statements, and goals were shared with each candidate in a one-to-one synchronous conference led by field supervisors. Researchers analyzed data to identify qualitative themes concerning the impact of the coherently sequenced activities. Data from the principal candidates and field supervisors were analyzed. (In memoriam, the authors recognize the contributions of Donna Azodi in this research effort.)*

**Keywords:** Principal Preparation, Principal Internship, Field Supervision

During the spring of 2022, a university located in Texas piloted research-based processes in the practicum effort of its principal preparation program. Evolving state and national standards, administrative rules from the state educational agency, and a desire for program improvement created the impetus that advanced substantial change in the practicum experiences of principal candidates. Enhanced with the assistance of revenue awarded from a competitive research grant, the principal preparation program developed three coherently sequenced and program mandated practicum observations that shaped the evolution of the practicum experiences.

The coherent sequence of observations found principal candidates being observed three times while leading one major campus-based project that stretched across 15 weeks. The observation activities were considered coherently linked to each other because they addressed a single purposed project/topic outlined in a document entitled *Observation Guidelines*. They were considered sequenced observations because the activities built upon each other. The first observation conducted within the first five weeks of the practicum established a base for future observations. The second observation, conducted in the middle of the 15-week experience, built upon the base that was established in the first observation. The third and final observation conducted toward the end of the practicum appropriately concluded the activities of the campus-based project. Principal candidates video recorded themselves leading these coherently sequenced campus activities. These recordings became practicum observations.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Often, the principal practicum and its activities have clear compliance requirements but have nebulous and inconsistent processes. Tally (2011) revealed that many principal candidates reported principal preparation programs needed restructuring to incorporate more clinical experiences in which candidates were afforded opportunities to both practice and apply leadership skills. Specifically, candidates wanted more opportunities for collaborative problem-solving in a community of peers. In addition, principal candidates valued, as an integral part of their skill development, the presence of a trusted, experienced leadership coach, or field supervisor, who guides, supports, and monitors their performance. In Tally's (2011) study, candidates readily shared examples of critical incidents where leadership coaches or field supervisors assisted them in handling real school issues.

Since Tally (2011), the standards associated with the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2018) were significantly updated with the implementation of the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Program Standards for Education Preparation Programs (EPPs). A significant portion of the updates directly and indirectly require more opportunity in the field, including the following:

- The preparation of school leaders requires overt connections and bridging experiences between research and practice.
- The preparation of school leaders requires comprehensive practice in, and feedback from, the field over an extended period.
- School leadership preparation programs must provide ongoing experiences for candidates to examine, refine, and strengthen the leadership platform that guides their decisions— especially during difficult times.

According to Martin et al. (2022), best practices during the design or redesign of principal practicum include the development of activities that increase teaming between the candidate,

the university, and the site campus thereby serving as a catalyst for the professional growth of candidates involved in the process. Practicum activities should be relevant, challenging, and high-level activities that are closely supervised. The immersion of candidates in real-world experiences positively affect the perceptions of all involved regarding the impact the practicum had on the development of administrator skills.

## **Literature Review**

### **Definitions**

- Candidate – An individual who has been formally admitted into an educator preparation program. In this paper, the term specifically refers to a graduate student seeking principal certification (19 Texas Administrative Code §228.2, 2020).
- Field supervisor – A certified educator with advanced credentials, hired by the educator preparation program to observe candidates, monitor their performance, and provide constructive feedback and coaching to promote the candidates’ professional growth. The field supervisor has a minimum of three years of experience as a principal and/or district-level leadership and specific training for field supervision (19 Texas Administrative Code §228.2, 2020).
- Observation – Each candidate is observed by a field supervisor during the first, second, and third portions of the practicum/internship timeframe. The observations are of structured, coherently sequenced activities, conducted by the candidate, which are recorded and submitted to the university field supervisors (19 Texas Administrative Code §228.35, 2020).
- Practicum – Candidates seeking principal certification are required to conduct a practicum (i.e., internship) in an authentic and state accredited school setting. For the purpose of this paper, practicum is synonymous with internship (19 Texas Administrative Code §228.2, 2020).
- Site supervisor – A campus principal who supervises, supports, mentors, and evaluates the candidate’s practicum/internship experiences serves as the site supervisor. The site supervisor must hold a valid principal certificate, have at least three years of experience as a principal and be located on the campus where the practicum/internship will be conducted (19 Texas Administrative Code §228.2, 2020).

### **Principal’s Role**

The role of the principal has shifted over time to become quite complex. In addition to the responsibility of maintaining a safe and well-managed school environment, current principals are expected to be instructional leaders who support curriculum and instruction, to ensure equity and inclusiveness for students and staff, and to do these in collaboration with the entire school community (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2018). The impact of an effective campus principal can be linked to observable outcomes. Obviously, the principal’s leadership skills matter in a host of school outcomes. These outcomes include increasing student

achievement, building a productive and positive school climate, facilitating collaborative learning communities, and engaging with teachers on instructional practices (Grissom et al., 2021). Consequently, educator preparation programs (EPPs) are responsible for preparing principal candidates to be proficient in all current principal standards of knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

### **Using the Practicum to Prepare Principal Candidates**

The complex nature of the principal's role demands that EPPs adapt their curriculum, instruction, and particularly the design of candidates' field work to provide authentic experiences that prepare candidates for leading a campus in today's school environment. According to Hora et al. (2020), internships are noted as providing high impact strategies for increased principal candidate engagement and future career success. Higher education is feeling the pressure to foster principal candidates' "employability" through work-based learning activities. Ergo, experiences in the field with real-world problem-solving for school improvement have become more significant for principal preparation in recent years.

While building level leadership preparation programs are ultimately an institutional responsibility, the strength of the design, delivery, and effectiveness of these programs will be significantly enhanced by P-12 participation and feedback (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2018, p.7). In addition, Standard 8 of the NELP Program Standards Building Level (2018) calls for candidates to complete an internship under the supervision of practitioners who are experts in their field. Candidates should be provided with coherent and authentic internship activities within a school setting. Candidates should also be engaged in multiple and diverse school settings.

Thessin et al. (2018) posited principal candidates could only improve their growth as administrators when they were given opportunities to lead and assume authentic campus leadership responsibilities. Candidates who demonstrated a strong work ethic and established trust with their mentors/supervisors were provided opportunities to lead relevant activities. Conversely, Thessin et al. (2018) learned that authentic experiences were not provided to the candidate in situations where innate abilities, commitment, and communication skills were questioned. Hence, it is incumbent upon EPPs to develop strong systems and supports for principal candidates to have significant and robust field experiences.

### **Field Supervisor's Role**

Augustine-Shaw and Reilly (2017) asserted one way to build capacity in beginning principals is through effective mentoring practices. Principal preparation programs could help reduce the initial gaps in knowledge and skills, or the leadership gap, of novice principals by incorporating meaningful, effective mentoring practices while training new principals. The field supervisor serves as an integral piece of the mentoring triad that also includes campus site supervision and the EPP personnel. According to Faulk et al. (2021), candidates in principal preparation programs greatly need field supervisors who encourage individual growth. Uniform feedback and meetings devised solely to meet program mandates do not provide for individual growth opportunities. Consequently, field supervisors need professional development focused on the need for

targeted, specific, and timely feedback for candidates in order to promote optimum growth in proficiency throughout their experiences in the field.

In addition, the relationship between the candidate and field supervisor is of paramount importance in fostering and enhancing the professional development of the principal candidate. Hora et al. (2020) revealed after a project or task is completed, providing timely and regular feedback to candidates is especially important to foster learning new skills and decision-making strategies. Further, candidates in the Hora et al. (2020) study rated supervisor support highly, showing the candidates sensed care and respect for their work from their supervisors. The researchers concluded that candidates felt their capacity to attain goals for development of professional skills was enhanced when field supervisors focused on candidates' psychological needs including respect, appreciation, well-being, and care.

### **Site Supervisor's Role**

The role of the site supervisor is also critical to the candidate's development, as the site supervisor has the most contact with the candidate day to day. Accordingly, expectations and training must be provided to the site supervisor by the EPP. Improving university-based principal internships by collaborating with school campuses produces graduates who have the skills to equitably improve student achievement and increase instructional capacity through instructional coaching. Furthermore, it develops marketable and job-ready principal candidates. (Palmer et al., 2021).

As with the field supervisor, the site supervisor–candidate relationship appeared to have a critical impact on the candidate's growth. Thessin et al. (2018) found in a case study, which included pairs of candidates and site supervisors, that candidates and site supervisors who developed a positive, trusting relationship influenced each other's contributions and growth during the internship process. It was further concluded that when the site supervisor trusted the candidate to conduct complex and diverse tasks, not only did the candidate develop proficiency in the NELP Building Level Standards, but the site supervisor also reported that they, too, grew from the leadership/mentoring relationship with the candidate.

### **Faculty's Role**

It is obvious to state that faculty are responsible for continuous improvement of curriculum and instruction as standards evolve. In addition, however, the field experiences of principal candidates have become critical to developing the complex and diverse skill sets and dispositions. As EPPs strive to adapt their program to address current principal standards and expectations for principal candidates, seeking feedback from candidates, field supervisors, and site supervisors can often provide valuable ideas when revising the principal internship. For example, one university ended the practice of requiring university field supervisors to approve internship projects. While the university field supervisors provided feedback and input, the direct design of activities became the responsibility of the site supervisor and candidate. Site supervisors valued improved relevancy of internship projects and the new impact that internship activities had at their schools (Greer, 2020). The need for the EPP faculty to initiate and structure a framework of effective communication with field supervisors, site supervisors, and candidates is imperative for

candidates' optimum growth. Principal candidates value access to course instructors, their site supervisor, and their field supervisor. Working closely with site supervisors increases professional communication. Additionally, access and communication with university staff, including field supervisors, assisted with successful completion of the principal internship (Nicks et al. 2018).

### **Methods and Procedures**

This study, via survey, examined the perceptions of twenty-five university field supervisors and 323 principal candidates regarding the impact of a coherent sequence of observations on principal candidates enrolled in a principal preparation program. All the 323 principal candidates successfully completed the coherent sequence of observations during the spring of 2022, which was a major component of the principal preparation program.

During the spring of 2022, each of the 323 assigned principal candidates participated in three individual one-to-one synchronous conferences with their assigned field supervisor selected from the twenty-five above-mentioned field supervisors. This resulted in a total of 969 individual one-to-one synchronous conferences. Each of the candidates successfully completed the practicum and completed the coherent sequence of observations developed for the restructured program.

Demographic profile data of the 323 candidates showed that 138 classified themselves as elementary teachers and 185 classified themselves as secondary teachers. While all the candidates were pursuing certification as a principal, eighty-two candidates were also pursuing a master's degree in educational leadership, 227 candidates already held a master's degree and were solely pursuing principal certification, and fourteen candidates were pursuing a master's degree in technology leadership while also pursuing principal certification. Approximately 54% of the candidates indicated they received certification as a teacher via a traditional route, while 46% of the candidates indicated they received certification as a teacher via an alternative route.

### **Process – The Coherently Sequenced Observation**

The university was committed to implementing three practicum observation phases that emulated the research based "Observing, Participating, and Leading" framework (Gray et al. 2007). The university was equally committed to structuring practicum observation activities where principal candidates addressed identified needs of socio-economic disadvantaged or at-risk students at their campuses. It was hoped that the coherent sequence of practicum observations would better prepare future school principals, as measured by certified field supervisors, and increase the proficiency and marketability of the principal program's graduates.

During the practicum observing phase, the principal candidate and campus leaders drafted a campus level needs assessment that addressed the teaching and learning of socio-economic disadvantaged or at-risk students at the campus. The principal candidate then shared the drafted needs assessment with a campus level faculty team that collaboratively identified achievement gaps in the data and discussed barriers to student achievement. The team meeting, led by the principal candidate, was recorded as the practicum observation video #1 that had guidelines and a grading rubric. After submission, a highly qualified university field supervisor reviewed each practicum observation video. During one-to-one synchronous online conferences,

the field supervisors shared individualized feedback, coaching statements, and goals with principal preparation candidates regarding their leadership efforts in this phase.

During the practicum participating phase, the principal candidate organized a faculty team meeting to develop a proposal for an instructional activity or service activity that addressed the targeted gaps and barriers identified in the observing phase and demonstrated in the practicum observation video #1. A recording of the proposal development during the faculty team meeting was submitted as the practicum observation video #2 that had guidelines and a grading rubric. After submission, a highly qualified university field supervisor reviewed each practicum observation video. During a one-to-one synchronous online conference, the field supervisor shared individualized feedback, coaching statements, and goals with the principal preparation candidates regarding their leadership efforts in this phase.

During the practicum leading phase, the proposal developed by the faculty team in observation #2 had been initiated. Careful and deliberate collection of data became part of a monitoring/adjustment review. The faculty team, led by the principal candidate, reviewed progress, successes, and challenges related to the proposal developed in the participating phase and demonstrated in the practicum observation video #2. Collaboratively, the principal candidate discussed any need for amendments to the proposal or identified steps needed to continue the effort. The committee meeting was recorded as practicum observation video #3. After submission, a highly qualified university field supervisor reviewed each practicum video. During one-to-one synchronous online conferences, the field supervisors shared individualized feedback, coaching statements, and goals with the principal preparation candidates regarding their leadership efforts in this phase.

The three practicum observations were aligned to the state's administrative code which contained standards required for principal certification. Components of each required standard were embedded in the observations. These components are listed below:

School Culture - the principal:

- ensures that a positive, collaborative, and collegial school culture facilitates and enhances the implementation of campus initiatives and the achievement of campus goals.
- uses emerging issues, recent research, demographic data, knowledge of systems, campus climate inventories, student learning data, and other information to collaboratively develop a shared campus vision.
- facilitates the collaborative development of a plan in which objectives and strategies to implement the campus vision are clearly articulated (19 Texas Administrative Code §241.15, 2020).

Leading Learning - the principal:

- creates a campus culture that sets high expectations, promotes learning, and provides intellectual stimulation for self, students, and staff.
- facilitates campus participation in collaborative school district planning, implementation, monitoring, and curriculum revision to ensure appropriate scope, sequence, content, and alignment.
- implements a rigorous curriculum aligned with state standards, including college and career readiness standards.

- analyzes the curriculum to ensure that teachers align content across grades and that curricular scopes and sequences meet the needs of their diverse student populations.
- monitors and ensures staff uses multiple forms of student data to inform instruction and intervention decisions to maximize instructional effectiveness and student achievement.
- ensures that effective instruction maximizes growth of individual students and student groups, supports equity, and eliminates the achievement gap (19 Texas Administrative Code §241.15, 2020).

Human Capital - the principal:

- invests and manages time to prioritize the development, support, and supervision of the staff to enhance student outcomes.
- facilitates the campus's professional learning community to review data, processes, and policies to improve teaching and learning in the school (19 Texas Administrative Code §241.15, 2020).

Executive Leadership - the principal:

- gathers and organizes information from a variety of sources for use in creative and effective campus decision making.
- uses effective planning, time management, and organization of work to maximize attainment of school district and campus goals.

Strategic Operations - the principal:

- outlines and tracks meaningful goals, targets, and strategies aligned to a school vision that continuously improves teacher effectiveness and student outcomes.
- allocates resources effectively (e.g., staff time, dollars, and tools), aligning them to the school priorities and goals, and works to access additional resources as needed to support learning.
- establishes structures to regularly monitor multiple data points with leadership teams to evaluate progress toward goals, adjusting strategies to improve effectiveness (19 Texas Administrative Code §241.15, 2020).

Ethics, Equity, and Diversity - the principal:

- models and promotes the continuous and appropriate development of all learners in the campus community.
- ensures all students have access to effective educators and continuous learning opportunities (19 Texas Administrative Code §241.15, 2020).

## Research Questions

Knowing that the above-mentioned seedbed of data was available, researchers developed the following research questions:

### Research Questions Using Field Supervisor Data

- RQ1 – What was the perception of field supervisors regarding the impact that the coherent sequence of observations had on the relationships between principal candidates and field supervisors?
- RQ2 - What was the perception of field supervisors regarding the impact that the coherent sequence of observations had on the professional growth of principal candidates?

#### Research Questions Using Principal Candidate Data

- RQ3 – What was the perception of principal candidates regarding the impact that the coherent sequence of practicum observations had on their ability to analyze issues, make decisions, and overcome problems?
- RQ4 – What was the perception of principal candidates regarding the impact that the coherent sequence of practicum observations had on their ability to build collaborative relationships?
- RQ5 – What was the perception of principal candidates regarding the impact that the coherent sequence of practicum observation videos had on their growth as an aspiring administrator?

### Data Collection

Survey data from field supervisors was garnered from two open-ended post observation conferences program evaluation questions:

1. How did the coherent sequence of observations impact teaming/relationships between principal candidates and field supervisors?
2. How did the coherent sequence of observations impact the personal/professional growth of principal candidates?

Survey data from principal candidates was garnered from a course embedded reflection opportunity provided to candidates after completion of the coherent sequence of observations. The reflection activity used six questions/prompts derived from a marketable skills instrument distributed by the university. The prompts included:

1. How did the coherent sequence of practicum observations impact your ability to analyze issues, make decisions, and overcome problems?
2. How did the coherent sequence of practicum observations impact your ability to demonstrate originality and inventiveness?
3. How did the coherent sequence of practicum observations impact your ability to articulate thoughts and ideas clearly?
4. How did the coherent sequence of practicum observations impact your ability to build collaborative relationships?
5. How did the coherent sequence of practicum observations impact your ability to leverage the strengths of others to achieve goals?
6. How did the coherent sequence of practicum observations impact your growth as an aspiring administrator?

### Qualitative Analysis

Archived data sources described in the data collection section were analyzed using qualitative methods from which the authors identified informative themes using the research questions as a structural guide. Specific statements were then dissected from the data and used as supporting evidence for the themes. Ultimately, the themes and supporting statements created a baseline for the improvement of internships and field supervision in principal preparation programs.

## **Results and Findings**

Below are the results and findings from the study. As mentioned earlier, the findings are organized around themes related to the research questions. Themes from research questions 1 and 2 contain data from field supervisors and appropriately contain supporting statements for the themes from field supervisors. Themes from research questions 3, 4, and 5 contain data from principal program candidates and appropriately contain supporting statements for the themes from candidates.

### **Themes from Research Questions 1 and 2 (Field Supervisor Data)**

Theme 1 - The coherent sequence of observation videos provided field supervisors a solid base upon which to build professional relationships with principal candidates.

- The sequenced observations with my principal candidates allowed me to provide personalized feedback and I was able to see how the candidate applied ideas from our coaching sessions in the post observation conference. I felt like I was able to build a rapport with the candidate and a professional relationship because we had the opportunity to have multiple conversations with one another.
- Meeting with the same candidates three times during these connected activities allowed for a true coaching/professional relationship to develop. The dialogue that occurred during the post observation conferences was more impactful because we had developed a trusting relationship. I had the opportunity to learn about the candidate professionally and personally, which in turn helped me with the type of feedback I could provide the candidate.
- The coherent sequence of observations greatly impacted teaming and relationships between the candidate and field supervisors. During our post observation conferences we could discuss recommendations for improvement and the probable outcomes if the recommendations were implemented. When following up and monitoring, we discussed the actual impact of the recommendations and what differences, if any, the recommendations really made. Because of this model of observations, we increased our comfort levels with each other.

Theme 2 - The coherent sequence of observation videos was a catalyst for professional growth in principal candidates because of better feedback and structured time for coaching and monitoring growth.

- The coherent sequence of observations allowed principal candidates to work closely with one field supervisor throughout the process. This allowed for better advice to be given and implemented by the candidate. It allowed for professional reflection and rich conversations between the field supervisor and the candidate.

- As the principal candidate reflected on quality feedback from the field supervisor, opportunities to implement strategies aimed at specific areas of growth were noted. For example – confidence to lead a meeting; organizing and structuring a collaborative meeting so that tasks could be completed; and the ability to reflect and improve upon leadership skills.
- I got to know the candidates and understand their thought processes and monitor the implementation of ideas from our conversations and coaching sessions. Instead of a one-time meeting, we were able to collaborate with the candidates, determine their level of commitment as a future administrator, and give more personalized feedback.

### **Themes from Research Questions 3, 4, and 5 (Principal Candidate Data)**

Theme 3 - The coherent sequence of practicum observation videos helped to build principal candidate confidence with reviewing data, presenting data and problem-solving.

- The observation sequence really prepared me to collect data, analyze it, and develop a solution. Initially, I was unable to see how the information I was collecting would have an impact on the final outcome, or activity. However, now that I am done with all three observation activities, I can see how they all came together to focus on one goal. At first, I was a little nervous because I had never spoken in front of my co-workers. However, by the third observation, I was more relaxed and comfortable with the information that we discussed.
- The sequence of practicum observation videos was very streamlined, and it made the process naturally progress. Throughout the completion of my observation tasks, I was able to continuously build on ideas and implement my plan of action immediately. Each activity prepared me for the next. They built my confidence, and I was ready to begin the next task almost immediately. This is due to the natural progression and the preparation steps in the guidelines and rubrics. These activities increased my confidence and ability to analyze learning gaps on my campus, and to lead a team of teachers to make purposeful decisions. I was very pleased with the sequence of the observation videos.
- The sequence of practicum observations helped me grow as a leader. I learned the value of using data to identify issues that have been occurring on campus regarding students' performance levels in specific areas. Another thing I learned to appreciate was the impact that collaboration really has on decision making and problem solving. Reading data and making connections is not extremely challenging; however, finding ways to address the discrepancies is a task that requires multiple perspectives. Working alongside the Math department really opened my eyes to a variety of options when it came to addressing students' learning needs. The discussions that took place in each meeting along with the input provided by the team gave me confidence as we prepared to proceed in addressing the identified problems.

Theme 4 - The coherent sequence of practicum observation videos established a forum that assisted with building collaborative relationships between candidates and colleagues, and between candidates and field supervisors.

- This portion of the sequence is the most beneficial aspect of the course. The opportunity to involve others in decision making builds confident relationships that create a shared vision. Collaborating with members of the staff deepened relationships, connected thoughts and ideas, and created a sense of purpose and belonging. Being open minded to the perspectives of others allowed me to broaden my understanding of my stance and challenged my original thoughts on specific subjects or issues. Collaboration is key to success.
- I feel these exercises have assisted in fostering collaborative relationships with my colleagues and field supervisor. The practicum sequence impacted my ability to leverage the strength of others to achieve goals through our discussions and collaborative brainstorming on how to make our students more successful.
- By undertaking a project of this magnitude, I relied upon the experience of my fellow teachers to create goals and drive our department forward. The collaboration that took place resulted in teachers, who previously had not worked together, coming together to improve their instruction. I have always held great professional relationships with my department but by participating in this process those relationships are now more profound. Teachers understand that they can rely on me and come to me with issues they may be experiencing. Collaborating, listening, empathizing, and providing comfort/guidance has strengthened our professional bond.

Theme 5 - The coherent sequence of practicum observation videos impacted communication, team building, and leadership skills in principal candidates.

- The sequenced practicum activities created intensively active workdays. My teaching and other responsibilities required me to network/team with others to accomplish the tasks. Creative thinking became a constant, and my interactions with administrators and teachers needed a high level of communication. Teachers work hard. To engage them, it required communication and skills such as leading thoughtful discussions with a goal-oriented outcome. The coherent sequence emphasized the importance of communicating and teaming to solving challenges in the school environment.
- This work challenged my abilities as an administrator. These activities demonstrated how data can tell a story. But it takes practice and teaming to interpret data effectively. These practicum observations detailed the importance of preparing an agenda and resources for a meeting and to make sure teaming experiences are as productive as possible. It is critical for an administrator to honor everyone's time and keep the team focused on the purpose of the experience. Communication skills are critical and improve with practice. I appreciated the opportunity to refine my leadership skills, and I look forward to more growth.
- The coherent sequence used stair-stepped activities to accomplish the objectives. Just as K-12 teachers scaffold learning for students, for better understanding and reinforcement of learned behavior, these sequenced practicum activities met the same purpose. The team building and communication skills required to review data,

and address campus needs, prepared us to complete a real-time project. This was a real-life, real-time opportunity to improve our leadership skills.

## **Conclusions and Discussion**

Below are the conclusions of this study. The conclusions also share comments from campus principals who served as mentors to principal candidates. The emailed comments from the mentors bolster the conclusions.

### **Conclusion #1**

The coherent sequence of practicum observations and related processes enhanced opportunities for principal candidates to build collaboration skills and professional relationships with their field supervisors and faculty members at their campuses. Principal candidates and field supervisors asserted the collaboration enhanced their working relationships which resulted in a mentoring process that allowed for up close monitoring filled with quality feedback and professional coaching. The coaching process was a catalyst for the candidates to learn how to leverage the strength of others to identify common goals to improve student achievement, and to identify solutions that promoted student growth.

This conclusion was supported by the following email sent to university leaders from a campus principal regarding the impact of the coherent sequence of observations:

While in her capstone course for Education Administration, C.G. excelled and performed exceptionally when she led, facilitated, and made decisions that impacted our students at *Conclusion #1 High School*. She displayed characteristics of a leader when she collaborated with other English II teachers to not only help the teachers to gain confidence in themselves in their performance as an instructional leader, but she also strengthened their roles as collaborative leaders. By using the program's coherently sequenced observation process and through facilitating, Ms. G. built teacher capacity by helping teachers build an awareness of our economically disadvantaged student population as well, the barriers that could be impacting our students. By doing so, the team was able to collaborate to identify common goals to improve student achievement as well as identify solutions that promoted student growth. Through the final stage of the program, teachers monitored and adjusted instruction as they reflected on their instructional delivery and impact on students. Overall, our 2022 STAAR English II scores show significant longitudinal growth for our economically disadvantaged students and our overall student populations. Additionally, the increase in scores, in comparison to our sister high school, shows a significant difference. Last, individual student growth from 9th to 10th grade is also seen. We are excited about the process, and we encourage Ms. G. to lead other grades in her department through the same process next school year.

### **Conclusion #2**

It was obvious from the findings that the candidates became more confident with communicating about data that addressed student achievement gaps and to improve instruction in the

classroom. Team building activities required to effectively review data, and required in the coherent sequence of observations, created real-world opportunities for the principal candidates to lead a campus effort. These teaming activities helped the candidates grow professionally and impacted the 323 campuses where practicum activities were undertaken.

This conclusion was supported by the following email sent to university leaders from a campus principal regarding the impact of the coherent sequence of observations:

It is a great pleasure to write you regarding Mr. L. We are from a magnet school in *Conclusion #2 ISD*. During the practicum course, Mr. L. scheduled multiple collaborative work sessions with our teachers that were interactive and enlightening. Using campus data on our targeted students, Mr. L. led sessions that allowed the teachers to explore and dig into the data of each of their at-risk students. Over a period of time, the discussions with the teachers went from being a little reluctant to very open conversations and having a willingness to discuss their vulnerabilities and areas they could improve. The outcome of these discussions has been very successful, as the teachers have discovered areas they can work on to close the achievement gaps of these identified students. The work Mr. L.

committed to is not over, in fact, it has just begun. The collaborative sessions were so successful that the teachers have expressed a desire to continue the work next school year. Mr. L. has grown tremendously and has made a great impact on the success of our students and campus.

### **Conclusion #3**

The activities and personalized feedback in the coherently sequenced practicum observations helped to enlarge the mindset of the principal candidates. Shifting the professional lenses of candidates from that of classroom teachers, to lenses of collaborative instructional principals, took practice. The sequential application of learned leadership skills during practicum observations provided the time and space for that practice to transpire.

This conclusion was supported by the following email sent to university leaders from a campus principal regarding the impact of the coherent sequence of observations:

I am writing regarding G.F., who completed her principal preparation practicum this past school year. Throughout the practicum, she took part in many activities specifically aimed at improving the achievement of our Economically Disadvantaged students. G.F. started these activities using the lens of a classroom teacher. As she continued to grow, that lens widened. These field-experiences, and her leadership classes, enabled her to grow students, grow her peers, shape her opinion, and successfully assist our community - which will have a lasting impact.

## **Recommendations**

### **Recommendation #1**

The coherent sequence of observations appears to have positively affected the candidates in the principal preparation program. The authors recommend the consideration of a coherent

sequence of observations approach at other universities and in other professional internships. For example, it would be interesting to see if this approach would enhance the superintendent internship.

## **Recommendation #2**

The coherent sequence of observations in this study focused on the achievement or instruction of at-risk and/or socio-economically disadvantaged students. For possible future use, the authors recommend the consideration of other topics within a principal's sphere of influence. For example, the focus topics could center around school safety, the achievement of other sub-populations, the achievement of students within a specific subject, or improving school community partnerships.

## **Limitations, Funding Disclosure, and Future Research**

### **Limitations**

This study examined qualitative data from the first attempt at implementing a coherent sequence of practicum observations. As with any first attempt, there will be amendments to the process when the practicum is offered in the future.

### **Funding Disclosure**

It should be noted that the research and findings presented were funded by a grant sponsored by Academic Partnerships.

### **Future Research Opportunities**

- This study garnered data from principal candidates and field supervisors. The addition of data from site supervisors would further inform educator preparation programs.
- Analyzing the impact of each principal candidate's work would be insightful. The coherent sequence of observations in the spring of 2022 had principal candidates leading efforts to improve the achievement of economically disadvantaged or at-risk students at 323 campuses. That seedbed of data could provide educators with innovative and relevant practices that address achievement gaps in those identified sub-populations thereby contributing to best instructional practices.

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# Identifying Perceptions of Superintendent Internship Site Supervisors on the Relevance and Impact of Internship Activities

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*This study explored the perceptions of district superintendents in Texas and Arizona concerning the internship activities of superintendent candidates they supervised. Twenty superintendents agreed to participate in interviews. Five uniform questions were presented during the interviews. A qualitative analysis of interview responses is shared, and conclusions are provided.*

**Keywords:** Internship, Superintendent Preparation, District Leadership

School district leaders play a critical role in improving student outcomes, ensuring quality instruction, and the ability to turn around struggling public schools (Scott, 2017). They must do this, despite other people and events that might be in opposition. There are virtually no documented instances of troubled school districts being turned around without intervention by an effective leader. Many other factors may contribute to such turnarounds, but leadership is the catalyst (Leithwood, et al. 2004). Superintendent preparation programs, therefore, have a significant responsibility in their admissions, training, and approving of candidates seeking superintendent licensure. Preparation program completers must be able to meet the current political, social, and economic environments and have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to meet the demands of the superintendency. Preparation programs that provide relevant field experiences activities help interns understand and relate to the superintendent's role and responsibilities (Thiede, 2020).

Interns must meet the requirements of the university or program supervisor and district site supervisor. They are observed, mentored, and assessed by both. The intern and program and district site supervisors become accountable for the breadth, depth, and rigor of the experience. It is the site supervisors, however, that allow certain activities and opportunities to be afforded in their districts. Research in this area indicates the best manner of improvement is found through an exchange process in which the superintendent, building administrators, teachers, board of education members, and the community simultaneously work with each other (Petersen & Barnett, 2005). The internship is a culminating experience for most educational leadership preparation programs. It is an approach to learning that McCarthy (2010) termed a "merging of experience, cognition, and behavior" (p. 131).

The National Educational Leadership Program (NELP) standards require programs to assign or approve site or district intern supervisors that have demonstrated effectiveness as an educational leader within a district setting; understand the specific district context; is present for a significant portion of the internship; is selected collaboratively by the intern and is provided with training by the supervising institution (NPBEA, 2018). These site supervisors are typically superintendents (small districts) or assistant superintendents (large districts) and vary greatly in experience, commitment, and ability to provide meaningful opportunities for the intern. Given this dilemma, this study sought perceptions from the vantage point of experienced and successful site supervisors.

### **Purpose of the Study**

There is a scarcity of research on superintendent preparation. Despite state, national, and program standards, these bodies seldom, if at all, cite detailed intern activities to be undertaken. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of superintendent internship site supervisors regarding activities they found to be meaningful and relevant, activities that were not meaningful or relevant, activities that should be required as part of the internship, activities that should be avoided, and advice for future internship site supervisors. The significance of the study is to provide pertinent information to superintendent preparation programs for program improvement.

### **Research Questions**

This study was guided by the following research questions given to experienced superintendent internship site supervisors as interview questions:

1. What internship activities were most relevant and meaningful to interns?
2. Were there any internship activities that were not relevant or meaningful to interns?
3. What activities should be required for all superintendent interns?
4. What activities should be avoided during the internship?
5. What advice should be given to new superintendent internship supervisors?

### **Methods and Procedures**

The authors from this study collaboratively developed interview questions regarding perceptions of the superintendent internship. These questions were developed prior to the identification of those to be interviewed. The survey questions were considered valid as they solicited open-ended perceptions of internship activities that had been observed.

Twenty school district superintendents, deemed as district level experts, who had experience as a superintendent internship site supervisor were identified in Texas and Arizona and agreed to be interviewed in this study. The authors appointed four interviewers from the team to conduct the interviews. Each interviewer had experience as a district superintendent and experience at a university assisting interns during internship activities. One interviewer was certified as an internship field supervisor.

The same questions were asked to each interviewee and the responses to the interview questions were recorded/documented. Extended discussions related to each interview question were considered acceptable during the interviews. Interviews were conducted in person or on the telephone during the spring, 2022.

Documentation from the 20 interviews was provided to each author on the research team. Two of the authors analyzed the interview documentation and constructed a compilation of the data. Each interviewer confirmed that the compilation of the data accurately represented their individual interviews thereby affirming the validity of the research.

### **Literature Review**

Central to all leadership preparation programs is the internship that is typically taken during or following required coursework. The importance of internship field experiences for aspiring superintendents cannot be understated. Clinical experiences in these programs must be integrated, authentic, and reflective of the real life of a school leader (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004). Martin et al. (2022) summarized the internship in the following manner:

The internship is both a capstone of an educational endeavor and a beginning experience in meeting the demands of a new position and new role in educational leadership. It is assumed that prerequisite knowledge, skill, and disposition are at an adequate level for entry into a new initial leadership experience. The internship requires a high level of readiness knowledge, skill, appropriate disposition, and effort. Gaining further from the experience of initial leadership and experience is the internship goal. For the internship to be effective, the intern must assume

responsibility and take the initiative to create meaningful experiences that build leadership capacity. The intern will develop, refine, improve, and incorporate leadership skills into their repertoire, along with gaining new knowledge and mindsets across a spectrum of school district contexts including various departments, community stakeholders, individual schools, and the larger state and national governing bodies (p. 9).

Numerous topics or knowledge and skill areas are articulated in national standards and presume internships will allow opportunities to take a leadership position in the areas. The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) National Superintendent Certification Program focuses on the following:

1. Transformational leadership
2. Understanding and developing board-superintendent relations
3. Ensuring equity
4. Navigating community, state, and national politics
5. Budgeting and economic pressures
6. Instructional leadership
7. Effective communications
8. Serving effectively as CEO in the district and community (AASA, 2019).

The NELP standards, however, require that the internship provides candidates with coherent, authentic, and sustained opportunities to synthesize and apply the knowledge and skills identified in NELP Standards 1–7 in ways that approximate the full range of responsibilities required of district-level leaders. These standards provide a greater breadth of skill areas that include vision, culture, community involvement, and building relationships. Standards 1-7 cover the following areas:

1. Lead, design, and implement a district vision and mission
2. Advocate for ethical decisions and cultivate professional norms and culture
3. Develop and maintain a supportive, equitable, culturally responsive, and inclusive district culture
4. Evaluate, design, cultivate, and implement coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, data systems, supports, assessment, and instructional leadership
5. Understand and engage families and communities and advocate for district, student, and community needs
6. Develop, monitor, evaluate, and manage data-informed and equitable district systems for operations, resources, technology, and human capital management
7. Cultivate relationships, lead collaborative decision making and governance, and represent and advocate for district needs in broader policy conversations (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2018, p. 29)

The National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards are research-based and were developed to assist with the preparation of district leaders. NELP Standard 8 discusses a relevant and impactful superintendent internship. The standard mandates that superintendent candidates complete district level activities under the supervision of practitioners who are experts in their field. Candidates must participate in authentic internship activities within a district environment. Furthermore, candidates should also be engaged in multiple district environments that provide opportunities to interact with stakeholders. Standard 8 of the NELP

standards describes the intent of the internship of turning applied knowledge as an aspiring leader into informed practice.

- Candidates are provided a variety of coherent, authentic, field, or clinical internship experiences within multiple district environments that afford opportunities to interact with stakeholders and synthesize and apply the content knowledge and develop and refine the professional skills articulated in each of the components included in NELP district-level program standards 1–7.
- Candidates are provided a minimum of six months of concentrated (10–15 hours per week) internship or clinical experiences that include authentic leadership activities within a district setting.
- Candidates are provided a supervisor who has demonstrated effectiveness as an educational leader within a district setting; understands the specific district context; is present for a significant portion of the internship; is selected collaboratively by the intern, a representative of the district, and program faculty; and is provided with training by the supervising institution (National Policy Board for Educational Administration 2018, p. 29).

Although there is a large body of research on each of the skill areas listed and a general consensus that an internship must be required and supervised by competent and experienced mentors, there are few, if any, studies on what specific internship activities should be recommended, required, or avoided.

To meet the expectation of real and authentic activities, internships are conducted in the schools and therefore, must confront current local, state, and national social issues. Given the current political polarization, discord, and violence observed in American culture, it is not surprising to see such issues manifesting themselves on the campuses, in board rooms, and administrative offices of school districts across the country. Some educational researchers have referred to this phenomenon as “the educationalization of social problems” (Sullivan, 2018). Indeed, for more than a decade, researchers have been referring to this tendency to place social problems on schools, and the research on this topic is significant (Kantor, 2013), (Bridges, 2008), (Sullivan, 2018). A few examples of the issues manifesting themselves in schools throughout the nation include the appearance of radical political agendas in student curriculum and classrooms (Beienburg M. , 2021); the value, manners, and morality of America’s youth (Farkas, 2001); policies and protocols related to transgender and non-gender conforming students (Ingrey, 2018); gun control and its effect on school shootings (Gius, *The Effects of State and Federal Gun Control Laws on School Shootings*, 2018); and school safety and security (DeMatteis, 2020).

## **Findings**

The following findings are structured and aligned using the research questions. Within these findings, the authors sifted comments from the site supervisors into themes to organize or bundle related activities. The authors also identified some independent activity recommendations from site supervisors that were worthy of discussion even though they did not fit into a theme.

## Themes Aligned to Research Questions (supported by comments from site supervisors)

RQ1 – What internship activities were most relevant and meaningful to interns?

Site supervisors find leadership activities that acquaint interns with the fiscal aspects of a superintendent's responsibilities most meaningful and relevant.

- The budget process is a meaningful component of the internship. Superintendent interns are less confident about their mastery of the budget and the budget process than any other area of leadership. This includes internship activities that strengthen and reinforce knowledge of the basic formula, grants, and budget accountability.
- Participation in activities that require proximity and collaboration with district level leaders are extremely relevant. An interview with the Chief Financial Officer is an especially relevant activity and tends to help interns gain confidence in their ability and knowledge to manage school district finances.
- Site supervisors should acquaint interns with the district budget process. Most interns have experience at the campus-level, and they need district-level experience.

RQ2 - Were there any internship activities that were not relevant or meaningful to interns?

Site supervisors find that clerical tasks associated with the internship can become irrelevant with little impact on the development of the intern.

- Internship paperwork can get in the way of learning activities. Internship is not about checking boxes on forms.
- Too much time can be spent on paperwork and documentation.
- Check in the box activities.... Surveys for the university... Clerical activities that tie up or overly involve the school superintendent and other personnel are often irrelevant to the internship.
- Avoid time consuming clerical assignments that take away time for hands-on experiences. It is not a research class; it is a practitioner preparation experience.

RQ3 - What activities should be required for all superintendent interns? (Authors found two themes.)

- a) Site supervisors find that interns should be required to be involved in leadership activities that acquaint them with how to communicate and work with stakeholders including the board of trustees, community organizations, and patrons.
  - Candidates should be exposed to communicating with the general public. Most of the superintendent interns whom I have supervised are campus level administrators and they are generally do not have experience in communication

with the general public. This includes constituents who may not have kids in the school district, leaders of business and industry, special interest groups, and others in addition to parents, grandparents, and guardians of students engaged in our schools.

- Interns should have some experience in public presentation or response to public inquiries regarding sensitive and significant issues. Activities that allow opportunities for interns to respond to public inquiry in a public setting in which they must be very careful of the words chosen and the message communicated are very important activities for an aspiring superintendent. Providing some experience in the development of a sensitive public statement in a positive, concise manner is invaluable to the superintendent intern.
- My superintendent interns made presentations to the district level committees and to the board of Trustees. Because of the internal consideration given to this issue by the board and by local constituents, this was a very relevant experience for these interns.
- While I do not think direct communication with an individual board member regarding school business is a good idea, attendance scheduled at board meetings should be required during the internship.

b) Site supervisors find that interns should be required to be involved in leadership activities that acquaint them with district operations and practices.

- Candidates should be required to be involved in activities associated with operations of the school district – transportation, maintenance etc.
- Candidates need exposure to real-world central office activities related to maintenance and custodial, child nutrition, transportation, facilities and construction, long-range planning, HR practices, and supervision of employees.
- Candidates need to be required to acquire knowledge about unique district characteristics (such as learning about the operation of a wastewater treatment plant).
- The internship should be required to target activities regarding facilities (safety, construction, maintenance), HR practices and leadership, policy reviews, and articulating the district vision for student learning.

RQ4 - What activities should be avoided during the internship?

Site supervisors believe that interns should be protected politically during the internship.

- “Do no harm” - the internship experiences should never be harmful to the intern, superintendent, or district.
- Site supervisors must protect the intern both personally and professionally.
- Interns should not be engaged in activities that may place them in a position of advocating a district position or initiative that could prove to be very unpopular in the community or

within the district with the intern having no real voice in the district's implementation or chosen position on the issue.

- Interns should not be engaged in activities that would place them in the middle of a conflict or communication between board members or between the board and the superintendent that could be divisive or derisive.

RQ5 - What advice should be given to new superintendent internship supervisors?

Site supervisors recommend that new internship supervisors collaboratively develop an internship plan with the intern that provides relevant activities aimed at meeting identified individualized needs.

- The site supervisor must commit time and resources to support an individualized relevant internship plan.
- Interns must complete a self-evaluation in an honest and professionally challenging manner and focus on activities which are most beneficial to the individual candidate.
- Activities should be built around individual needs. Some interns have more background than others.
- Interns and site supervisors need to analyze the intern's background and provide activities that address specific needs.
- The site supervisor and intern need a clear understanding of national leadership standards and develop activities that address those standards.

### **Other Recommended Activities from Site Supervisors Worthy of Discussion**

- Activities that have an emphasis on instructional improvement. Interns should be required to facilitate a meeting or lead a committee or conduct an evaluation of a program or otherwise participate in an activity that helps them to focus on their role as an instructional leader.
- The superintendent interview is an important activity for all interns. I cannot overemphasize my belief that this activity has great value in the growth of the intern.
- I would advise a new superintendent internship supervisor to approach the role with no egos. The goal of the site supervisor is not to boast or flaunt your position or your authority. The goal is to help the intern gain experience and knowledge that will help them be better prepared to lead a school district.

### **Conclusions**

A wide range of professions require an internship as an integral part of the preparation and training to practice. In addition to education, internships are common in business operations, marketing, engineering, sales and business development, media communications, and healthcare (The New York Times, 2017). In general, internships are designed to allow an aspiring practitioner the opportunity to work closely under the guidance of an expert in the field, to gain some limited experience in the unique intricacies and challenges of the field, and to develop the

proficiencies, attitudes, and communication skills that are necessary for success in a particular field (Guerrero, 2022).

The authors of this study have extensive experience in the leadership of a school district and in the supervision of internship programs designed to prepare educators to lead a school district as the superintendent. Additionally, the authors of the study strongly agree that the “real world” experiences gained during the internship are key to the success of beginning superintendents. In viewing the findings of this study through the lens of experience, the authors arrived at a number of salient interpretations and implications. For example, since the licensure of a school superintendent is a state function and programs that offer internships must meet professional standards that are developed and monitored by professional organizations, all internship programs must comply with state and federal laws and should reinforce the standards outlined in the educational entity’s accreditation standards. Equally important, the internship experience should provide opportunities for the intern to interact with laws, regulations, and professional standards and to participate in decisions and leadership opportunities that ensure compliance with laws and regulations related to education. We also recommend that the internship experience be designed to provide occasions during which an intern might meet and establish a relationship with state and federal education oversight officials and with officers and directors of the various professional organizations that wield influence over the preparation of educational leaders. Indeed, the opportunity to expand and strengthen one’s professional network is a noteworthy event in one’s preparation to lead and the authors see the internship as a vital contributor to this important endeavor, as the politicization of the superintendency is ever expanding.

Most people who have any experience in education would not argue with the adage that the school business is a “people” business, even as online student opportunities increase. In order for people to survive and thrive in any human initiative, it is imperative that relationships be developed, strengthened, and maintained. The development of relationships and the strengthening of relations and associations among constituents of the educational enterprise should be reflected heavily and consistently in the internship activities. The site supervisor can contribute to this strategy of relationship-building by honoring and enhancing his/her relationship with the intern. Trust between the intern and intern supervisor leads to an expansion of internship opportunities for the intern. Time for conversation and mentoring of the intern should be prioritized in the site supervisor’s schedule. When meetings or conversations or mentoring sessions are scheduled, the site supervisor should view such activities as a high priority on his/her calendar. A pathway of communication between the intern and the site supervisor must be opened and maintained so that the intern feels comfortable in sharing concerns and asking questions and seeking guidance from the leadership expert. Site supervisors are often the ultimate leader of a school district or, at least, a significant leader in the school district hierarchy. The site supervisor’s commitment to making time available for the purpose of meeting, mentoring, and counseling an intern who is someday likely to assume a senior leadership position should be viewed as a contribution not only to the development of the individual intern, but also as an investment in the profession. An “unintended consequence” of such an investment could be the development over a period of time of relationships, trust, and confidence in junior district administrators to the point that the district is able to grow its own

legacy of potential leaders to fill top level administrative positions within the district and to send out highly qualified leaders to assume positions of responsibility in other districts as well.

All public-school districts rely predominantly on public tax dollars for funding and even private or religiously affiliated schools have the same fiduciary responsibility to spend dollars judiciously to support student learning and growth and to ensure transparency in the expenditure of district funds. Therefore, aspiring superintendents would do well to participate in internship activities that expose one to the budget process, state and federal laws related to school district finances, prioritization and allocation of scarce financial resources, the relationship between staffing and budget, purchasing protocol, and financial accountability. Internship activities related to budget and finance should be heavily weighted toward the ethics of financial oversight and planning. State funding mechanisms, grant procurement and oversight of grant funds, and general budget accountability may have unique properties from state to state and even from district to district. However, activities that expose the superintendent intern to the development of a district budget, the oversight of district expenditures, the accountability protocol practiced in the district, legal implications of school finance and expenditures and accountability, and other areas of financial credibility should be emphasized in the internship plan.

It is interesting to note the descriptive term used by one of the study respondents when the role of the superintendent was described as “the communicator in chief.” Internship activities that place the intern in proximity to senior level discussion and debate and the development of directives, announcements, and information provided to district employees, parents, students, and district patrons are especially beneficial in helping potential superintendents learn how to utilize various communication strategies and technologies in the dissemination of information and to structure such data in a manner that is most efficient and effective.

Finally, the potentially divisive and controversial issues referenced in the literature review of this article should be kept in mind as the internship is developed and implemented. While prospective superintendents need guidance and experience in dealing with these kinds of issues, interns seeking qualification as a superintendent along with their site supervisors and university professors should exercise caution in placing superintendent interns in decision-making roles or in activities that entail strong public scrutiny and a likelihood for vigorous public debate that often turns raucous, harsh, and disorderly. Many of the polarizing topics impacting education have the potential to set off explosive public confrontations. In view of the vacillating stances of public opinion related to some of these issues and the extremely high potential for some sort of outside intervention, either legitimate or illicit, internship activities should be carefully evaluated as to their value in teaching aspiring superintendents important skills and knowledge that will contribute to their growth and preparation to lead a school district versus an experience that could significantly detract from a intern’s potential leadership of a school district. Such experience, even as an intern, has the potential to have profound effects on the superintendent candidate’s future and one’s ability to procure and maintain a position of executive leadership. One of the internship supervisor’s major responsibilities is to “do no harm” to the intern’s professional career.

A cursory review of the “Findings” section of this article will provide a number of other important topics that one should consider in the development of a meaningful superintendent internship. Certainly, there will always be unique characteristics and circumstances in each

district and even among individual interns and site supervisors that should also be considered in the development and implementation of the superintendent internship. Even so, the superintendent internship should be viewed as a critically important training and development activity that has great potential to prepare one to provide momentous leadership during times of turmoil, crisis, and great challenge. Even as the heart surgeon relies on the experience and training, he/she acquires in the surgical internship, the aspiring superintendent also depends on the training and experience he/she attains in the internship that represents a collaborative effort between himself/herself, the university, and the site supervisor.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The findings of this study were limited to the perceptions of 20 internship site supervisors from two states. Data were not collected on the site supervisors' years of experience in the superintendency or in internship supervision, the size of the districts, or the number of interns supervised.

### **Future Research**

#### **Recommendation #1**

Because of the limitations listed above, a similar, but larger study including multiple states would be interesting.

#### **Recommendation #2**

It would be interesting to conduct a similar study but gather perspectives from school board members.

#### **Recommendation #3**

Given the importance of superintendents needing to address highly political and sensitive issues and the reluctance of site supervisors to involve interns in those type of district activities, it is imperative that further research find solutions to this dilemma.

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# Tell Me What You Really Think: Student Voice in Assessment Design for Educational Leadership Programs

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*Student voice related to assessment, particularly in graduate educational leadership preparation programs, can be a powerful source of data to inform program development and implementation. This case study explores student experience and attitude toward assessment in two graduate-level educational leadership programs at a midwestern university in the U.S. A multi-method case study design was employed to gain an understanding of current assessment practices including focus groups, interviews, and document analysis. Findings reveal multiple themes related to students' preferences for assessment as well as the absence of language pertaining to the use of student voice in the development and implementation of assessment in available guidance documents.*

**Keywords:** Student voice; educational leadership; assessment; case study

Faculty at Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) utilize assessment to evaluate student learning and performance on learning objectives (Ashenafi, 2017), provide formative information about instruction (Blair & Noel, 2014), and program evaluation and improvement purposes (Stein et al., 2021). Key assessments are often used to provide summative data about student and program performance. While IHEs are tasked with ensuring the validity and reliability of key assessments, the inclusion of student voice in the creation and implementation of these assessments is often neglected (Bain, 2010), as evidenced by a gap in the literature regarding student voice in higher education assessment, particularly related to educational leadership programs. This study offers new knowledge regarding key assessments by collecting and analyzing student feedback in two educational leadership preparation programs at one institution in the Midwestern U.S. For the purposes of this study, candidate and student are used interchangeably to designate participants in advanced educational leadership certification programs.

This study was conceptualized as IHE faculty were updating key assessments during program development and accreditation activities for two programs that lead to certification at the building and central office levels. During this process, it became apparent that guidance surrounding student voice was missing in available assessment resources. Literature related to graduate degree programming for educational leadership preparation programs also failed to answer questions on the topic.

Both programs were aligned to the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) standards, required state approval, and were undergoing an accreditation cycle through the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) at the time of this study while transitioning to the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards. Both programs were administered through an educational leadership department and both faculty member researchers possess PK-12 administration backgrounds and practical PK-12 experience related to student voice in education.

Importantly, candidates enrolled in educational leadership preparation programs typically have educational and professional backgrounds in assessment practices in PK-12 education, as most are current teachers or administrators. In working with these students as research participants, researchers gained access to their expertise, consultation, and informed feedback that differs from participants without experience in assessment design and implementation (Blair & Valdez-Noel, 2014; Jensen & Bennett, 2016).

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore current assessment practices in two graduate educational leadership programs to inform changes in practice while centering and demonstrating value for student voice as an equity practice. In addition to qualitative data from candidates, this study examines guiding documents for educational leadership preparation programs relating to assessment practices such as program standards, accreditation standards, and university-level documents. This study sought to address the following research questions:

1. What are current assessment practices in two educational leadership programs?
2. How do students in graduate educational leadership preparation programs at one midwestern U.S. institution describe their experiences with and attitudes toward assessment?

## **Literature Review and Theoretical Foundation**

Students in educational leadership preparation programs typically have experience with pedagogy that typical university students do not, and when asked to share their voice for assessment and evaluative purposes, educational leadership students share expertise about how they learn and what best supports that process (Blair & Valdez-Noel, 2014). When conceptualizing this study, it was understood that by creating space for students to share their voices and lend their expertise on assessment, there was also an opportunity for participants to engage in an experience that could apply to their professional practice.

### **Student Voice and Assessment in IHEs**

Student voice can be understood as a resource for multiple aspects of continuous improvement in IHEs (Stein et al., 2021) and the act of seeking student voice itself implies someone is poised to listen and respond, creating a culture where students feel heard, considered, and affirmed in their mattering (Blair & Valdez-Noel, 2014). Despite this understanding and over 30 years of research in the field, engagement of student voice in programmatic or curricular improvements is still not commonplace (Curl & Cook-Sather, 2021), leaving discussions of assessment in IHE settings to be dominated by the need to measure or certify learning (Ashenafi, 2017; Bain, 2010). When changes are made for improvement of programs based on student voice, they are viewed as more influential and credible by students (Stein et al., 2021), yet it remains an underutilized resource despite this and other positive implications. For example, the act of intentionally seeking student voice around aspects of curriculum benefits students' motivation, commitment, perception of shared responsibility for learning, and improved grades and course passing rates (Bovill et al., 2011; Brooman et al., 2015). Additionally, it has the potential to impact instructors' effectiveness and motivation to innovate their teaching and learning practices when student voicework is a part of the instructor evaluation process (Blair & Valdez-Noel, 2014; Brooman et al., 2015).

### **Student Voice and Power in IHEs**

Although there is a lack of clarity and consistency in IHEs' use of student voice as a means for student empowerment (Seale, 2009), the notion of valuing student voice forces IHEs to rethink sources of knowledge, question whose perception holds power, and consider who can construct knowledge and influence learning, thus expanding the ownership of power within IHEs (Blair & Valdez-Noel, 2014). When programs invite student voice and use their findings to drive program decisions, they disrupt the normative practice of passively capturing student viewpoints, which maintains the power relationships between faculty and student (Boud, 2007; McCleod, 2011). Incorporating student voice into improvement or evaluative processes can also help to identify organizational barriers and instructor bias. This was demonstrated by Brooman et al. (2015) who found that students whom instructors had labeled as 'reluctant learners' actually shared a strong desire to learn, and described limited opportunities for engagement and 'over-zealous' attendance penalties as having a negative effect on their active engagement in class. The disconnect between instructor-perception and student-reality demonstrates how the use of

student voice can attend to bias which can negatively affect a student's experience and persistence toward degree attainment.

### **Student Voice and Educator Preparation Programs**

When student voicework is sought to improve curriculum, instructor pedagogy and practices, or assessment, the student's voice is viewed as credible simply because student participation and positionality give them expertise in the experience (Rudduck & Flutter, 2004). In teacher and leader educator preparation programs, students have an even greater level of expertise than just experience, and their voice can serve as consultation. When students serve as consultants for teaching and learning, the relational dynamic between student and staff shifts, and both student and faculty feel a dual ownership of and responsibility towards the learning environment (Jensen & Bennett, 2016). In the case of pre-service teachers, pedagogy and assessments of learning are typically part of require coursework. Likewise, many aspiring leaders have been or currently are PK-12 classroom teachers, and pedagogy and assessment of learning are a part of their daily work. Additionally, within their graduate courses, they are learning to evaluate and create systems of shared leadership toward improvements of teaching and learning.

Being attuned to this highly experienced student population, some researchers have sought pre-service teachers' voices on specific topics such as mental health literacy (Ressler et al., 2022), yet there is little research on leadership preparation programs accessing the incredibly unique and expert voice of students for programmatic and pedagogical improvements. However, Lac and Mansfield (2018) and Bertrand and Rodella (2018), concluded that student voicework should be taught in leadership preparation programs as a social justice practice giving aspiring leaders the fluency and capacity to embed systems in the schools, they lead to amplify and empower stakeholder voice.

### **Conceptual Underpinnings**

This work was inspired by Bain's conceptual model of Assessment for Becoming (2010). Within this model Bain provides a theoretical and practical perspective for IHEs to consider as they work towards equitable assessment practices for students (Bain, 2010). The model positions democratic dialogue as essential to equitable assessment (Bain & Golmohammadi, 2016), calling to light the ways assessment can be problematic (Bain, 2010). Rooted in critical pedagogy (Friere, 1970), this conceptual model includes a robust system of elements and features of Assessment for Becoming. In this paper, attention is focused on two components of the model, specifically the integrated features of student voices, and the encouragement of the use of critical thinking. The critical thinking aspect of the model allows for viewing the work of assessment in a different manner, creating an openness toward improvement. Additionally, the model's foundation in critical pedagogy creates space for authentic dialogue between learners and educators as equally knowing subjects, also providing an alternative focus for assessment practice that moves students away from being a passive recipient in assessment towards a discourse that supports the development of student autonomy and more effective student/academic partnerships (Bain, 2010). The integrated features of student voicework is an adaptation of Lundy's (2007) approach to Student Voice in Assessment Model and includes space, audience, and influence. Finally, it also

pulls from Batchelor's (2006) work, encouraging the idea that students have three voices— the epistemological voice, or a voice for knowing, a practical voice, or a voice for doing, and an ontological voice, a voice for being and moving forward.

## **Methodology**

A multi-method case study design (Creswell et al., 2007; Creswell & Poth, 2016) was employed to explore student perceptions regarding current assessment practices while centering student voice. Case study methodology was adopted to allow for deeper insight utilizing focus groups, interviews. Document analysis was conducted to analyze content and address the nature of relevant documents (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), and document analysis methods to collect and analyze qualitative data from students and guidance documents.

Data for focus groups and interviews were analyzed utilizing investigator triangulation (Yin, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) whereby each of the three researchers analyzed the data, performed coding, and shared results. Furthermore, data from pertinent documents was analyzed and triangulated with focus group and interview data to strengthen validity utilizing multiple sources of data (Yin, 2018; Yin, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This multi-method approach provided a holistic description of assessment practices in both programs and contributes to the sparse literature on the use of student voice for assessment in graduate educational leadership preparation programs.

### **Focus Groups and Interviews**

This study builds upon foundations of research that employ focus group and interview methods to generate ideas around program implementation and curricular design (Breen, 2006). More specifically, an embedded single-case design for the focus group and interview portions of this study (Yin, 2018) was employed. Focus group and interview methods were chosen to work towards both excavation of memories around assessment experience as well as development of new ideas.

### **Data Collection**

This study utilized a purposeful (Creswell, 2013), homogenous (Suri, 2011) sampling technique. All participants were current students in one of the graduate educational leadership preparation programs and had participated in key assessments during coursework at the institution. Researchers invited current students in both programs to participate via e-mail and interest to participate was collected using a Qualtrics survey. The student researcher conducted scheduling and protocol distribution. Students were invited to participate in virtual meetings due to the nature of the COVID-19 crisis and were provided protocols a week before their session to allow for thoughtful engagement. Sessions were approximately 60 minutes long with data collection taking place during April 2021.

Understanding the importance of attending to details of verbal and non-verbal communication during virtual focus groups, the number of participants in each group was purposefully low, permitting a maximum of six participants per session. Students participated in

either focus groups or interviews according to their preference, which were offered during various days and times. In addition to focus group and interview questions, the protocol included prompts providing examples of key assessments and methods of feedback utilized in the programs.

A total of 16 students, including teachers, principals, deans, and other school or district leaders participated in four focus groups and two interviews. Participants worked across several settings including public, private, and charter schools, as well as elementary, middle, and high schools adding to the maximum variation of the sample and contributing to the transferability of the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Recruitment and subsequent data collection stopped when the research team was confident the data had become saturated and no new information was forthcoming (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2016). Prior to data collection, faculty piloted the focus group and interview questions through semi-formal focus groups with students in each program and used these findings to inform the final protocols.

### ***Focus Group and Interview Data Analysis***

Sessions were electronically recorded and transcribed, audited for accuracy, and deidentified by the student researcher before sharing transcripts with faculty researchers. All authors completed a reliability check by coding the data individually (Breen, 2006) before a final inductive method of analysis (Thomas, 2006; Yin, 2018) guided by case study methodology was conducted. The data were organized and interpreted through a process of disassembling and reassembling data by applying codes to fragments of the conversations we had with students in focus groups and interviews (Yin, 2016). This process began with open coding all interview and focus group data using qualitative analysis software. During this stage of coding researchers identified patterns within and across participant data. Next an axial coding process to organize these patterns further into categories and subcategories (Yin, 2016) was conducted. For example, initial codes like Praising the Practical and Wanting to Learn from Leaders were assigned during open coding. During the axial coding process these codes were organized as subcategories under the larger theme of Desire for Experiential Assessment, which was then placed with other themes under the larger theme of Student Preferences for Assessment.

### **Document Analysis**

To further investigate student voice in IHE assessments for educational leadership preparation programs, a document analysis was conducted. Document or content analysis is a method for describing and interpreting the written productions of society in qualitative research methodology (Marshall & Rossman, 2014) and can serve to reduce problems and challenges associated with reflexivity (Yin, 2016). This study employed a three-step process to analyze relevant documents (Bowen, 2009) that included skimming, thorough reading, and interpretation of the text to determine the level and types of information related to student voice present in the assessment process. Additionally, each document was searched for terms such as *student* or *candidate voice*, *choice*, and *input*.

Documents were chosen based on influence over graduate educational leadership programs. Documents were deemed relevant to the problem and purpose of this study given that

they were the main guidance documents available at the national and university levels. All documents were approved through respective bodies (national organizations and the university) signifying completeness and comprehensiveness. All documents were considered authentic, credible, and accurate as they were retrieved directly from original author websites and university internal sources.

Building and central office standards from NELP and ELCC were analyzed. Accreditation documents included the *CAEP 2021 Standards for Advanced-Level Programs*, the *Policy Changes: Accreditation for Advanced-Level Programs* documents (CAEP, 2022), and the *CAEP Revised 2022 Standards Workbook* (CAEP, 2021). University guidance documents and website contents were obtained from college-level assessment personnel and accessed online through internal and public-facing electronic sources.

### **Positionality**

The research team consisted of three members, two full-time tenure-track faculty, serving as program director and assessment coordinator, and one Ph.D. candidate who worked as a research assistant. According to Brooks (2015) “One glaring omission in many qualitative research studies of educational leadership is a lack of attention to the relational, power and gatekeeper dynamics that influence the study” (p. 800). To mitigate power differentials between faculty and students, the research assistant collected data and deidentified them before sharing with faculty researchers. The research team worked from the philosophical foundations of critical qualitative inquiry, holding essential the belief that reality is shaped by systems in ways that privilege some and marginalize others (Rudman & Aldrich, 2017). As educators, the researchers recognized the value in centering student voice and encouraged participants to reflect on their experiences and their relation to political and cultural systems (Darder et al., 2017). The research team brought significant histories to this work as former educators, educational leaders, and as faculty teaching and conducting research within both programs. Researchers worked individually and collectively to consider how individual histories impacted this work, knowing that tremendous responsibility accompanies conducting research from an “insider position” (Berger, 2015, p. 223).

### **Findings**

As evident in findings from this study, students prefer assessments that are applicable, differentiated, and that they appreciate the opportunity to provide information to shape the assessment process. The document analysis confirmed that student voice is missing from guidance materials related to graduate educational leadership assessment development or implementation in a significant way. These findings provide valuable information related to the exploration of using student voice in educational leadership certification programs as well as critical program development information.

### **Focus Groups and Interviews**

Analysis of the focus group and interview data provided a thorough understanding of student experience and opinion on assessment within the programs. According to the analysis process outlined previously in this paper, findings are categorized according to three strong themes that echoed across data collection with students including two themes related to student preferences regarding assessment, experiential and differentiated assessment opportunities, and participant perspective on student voice.

### ***Student Preferences for Assessment***

Analysis of data from focus groups and interviews provided an understanding of students' experiences with and opinions on assessment. These results reveal perceptions and descriptions of participant preferences for assessment experience and with two main themes emerging that include *Experiential* and *Differentiated Assessment*.

**Experiential.** Participants consistently described a preference to learn through action. They described meaningful assessment as having practical application to current or future work as educational leaders. This was summarized by one participant who stated, "I would like to see more practical application to assessments that we can use beyond our degree so that we can carry it into our careers." Results indicate that participants want to learn by doing and they described an appreciation for assessment that is active, practical, and hands-on in all focus groups and interviews. More specifically, participants described learning the most from real-life, hands-on learning experiences:

"So far, I have really found the practical things very valuable, writing a school improvement plan, writing a communications plan, and looking at our existing plan, things that are more, almost like an internship, but not like we really have to go into."

Reiterating this notion, another participant shared that the "theories, and all that kind of stuff" were "not so much for me." Another participant addressed the notion of value in application of content to their current role:

"I have approached everything in a way that made it meaningful for me because I was able to apply a lot of it to my existing job. So that's been the most valuable, when I could take whatever data set I'm currently working on. For example, right now we're doing a lot with our attendance data and looking at that through our continual improvement process. Being able to use that for the case study that I just said, f that was useful and valuable for me. But even things that were more theory based, I think it's all very useful to learn about though, but in terms of most valuable, the practical that I can apply from 8 to 5, and then at class at 7 and it all relates to each other."

Participants shared information related to capitalizing on strengths specific to applicable assignments. An example includes the following student quote:

"I just love the assignments where you're able to kind of like, showcase what you know best, and I know you have to push out of your comfort zone and, obviously write scholarly articles but I agree with you, I feel like the ones where I'm able to get my hands dirty so to speak, I think it's good practice for you know, being a leader in a building."

Another participant articulated these points further by describing themselves as "hands on" and expressing interest in the opportunity to "have meetings with a superintendent or shadow a

principal or interview a principal” and to conduct “professional development based on the research I've done on this topic because those are the things that I could use.”

Participants asked specifically for case studies, simulations, interviews with school leaders, mock board meetings, and other types of experiential learning. The following quotes represent much of what researchers heard pertaining to students want for real-life application:

“I would love some real-life scenarios of things that occurred. They don't necessarily have to name names, but just real things that have happened in schools. They don't have to be long, maybe come up with a solution on our own and then maybe discuss it and try to come up with what would be the best course of action. I like those and I think that's where a lot of times I walk away with the most insight.”

Another student shared:

“So, I would like to see more of those real, what is happening in your world, who is involved, how are they involved? Here's the problem. How would you and your school solve it? I have found a little bit more of those I think are helpful.”

As participants described their preference for experiential learning a related, resonant theme emerged, which was for experiential assessments to be ongoing and evolving. Several times participants asked for opportunities to develop projects over the span of their graduate program. Here a participant describes their preferences to develop a project over several classes. They also highlight the practicality of this approach according to the demands on a district leader:

“It would be nice if, you know, ‘this is a component of something that you're going to do when you get to the next class, or when you eventually take class x’ and so then we could keep it and we could use it and we could build it in there... and then we would add other things around it that were relevant to the class we were in. I would love to see continuity between the classes. I think that would be great, because that's everything you do with continual improvement of schools anyway. I mean, you don't make a one-year plan, you make a three-to-five-year plan.”

**Differentiated.** Students consistently brought forward a preference for assessment that is differentiated. Through analysis, researchers heard participants recommend more innovative assessment practices, claiming that in using a variety of methods to evidence their learning, they could have more control over their learning and the subsequent application of that learning as educational leaders. In voicing their preferences for innovative and differentiated assessment experiences, participants recommend the opportunity to represent learning in ways that felt good to them, including podcasts, mock school board meetings, developing professional learning for teachers, and analyzing budgets. While the scope of their ideas and recommendations were diverse, preferences were preferences for choice; for the opportunity and power to demonstrate understanding according to their needs and interests.

Also key within the discussion of this theme is that participants valued the professional diversity within their programs and thought it was important that assessment be differentiated according to professional role. Some students were already in positions of leadership, and their needs were different from current classroom teachers, who reported aspirations of moving into positions of leadership.

Here a current leader describes the value in being tasked with analyzing situations from their current position, as a leader:

“I like framing you as the building leader, and how do you look at an issue as instead of the way you would have to look at it as a teacher, or the way that you would look at it as the person who was in charge of the budget. I feel like those mental exercises are very valuable because instead of just going through and saying, I can itemize a budget and I can do this, and I can follow the orders, life is going to throw you curve balls. So how are you going to [balance] the budget when you're losing 10% of your student population next year?”

Here a teacher shares their needs as an aspiring educational leader, and we hear both the theme of the preferences for experiential assessment as well as the preferences for assessment tailored to professional role:

“I think my ideal learning style would always be in a situation where — we're trying to be prepared to be principals or leaders in a school, right? So as much exposure as we can get to different things, the better for me. I'm okay with doing a research topic on something, it might take up a lot of time. It's a good part of your grade, but I'm only really learning maybe about a couple of different aspects of school leadership, whereas if people could throw a whole bunch of problems at me, real problems, real things that you might run into a school. I think I always appreciate that because I want to know if I'm in that situation sometime, I want to have some insight into how I might react to it.”

Another teacher shares the importance of differentiation according to role:

“I feel like we all come from a very wide range of teaching situations. I mean, I teach at a very small Catholic school. My experience may be very different from someone else. I was in a class of someone who taught in a special ed preschool, whereas then we have another person that's in a high school science class. So there are opportunities to give feedback or do assignments.”

Study participants described the need for differentiation as a response to a diverse set of skills and interests. As both graduate students and professionals versed in assessment practices, students called for the opportunity to evidence their learning using a variety of modalities:

“You know, I think we think of assessment as a test, but you can show you learned all the same information not in a test, but maybe as a paper or maybe as a podcast, or a PowerPoint presentation that you record and share the information. I just think that when there isn't such a limit on the way we express information, I think we get a better quality of information from people when we don't put those boundaries on them.”

Another participant shared a similar perspective. They said that they would enjoy an informal conversation with their professor where they could dialogically evidence their learning. They again point to the way differentiation allows for different ways of evidencing learning, saying that in this hypothetical type of conversational assessment “they're still assessing, we're still talking about the topic and they're assessing do we really have mastery of that?”

Participants also consistently asked for the opportunity to make choices around their assessment, for their experiences to be differentiated in terms of evidence of learning according to their decision making. Here one participant explains:

“One of the things for me would even be like, maybe a couple of options, I know that things started to change as I was going through the program, and as I was later on in the program, I was able to draw on a lot of that stuff I had before. And I almost feel like my experience level with the content grew. So, I would have loved to be able to have a choice

based off the skill set of the class I've already got right now and, maybe what I'm experiencing in the world, right at this moment, like, this is going to fit better. [...] You choose your own adventure, that'd be perfect. I do those in my classes all the time and I feel like I get some better products from my students.”

### ***Value for Student Voice***

As researchers move to center student voice in both research and practice, it is worth noting the feedback received from study participants regarding the study itself. Consistent were participant messages around the value of incorporating student voice in program development. Participants across professions and programs shared with the interviewer that soliciting student voice is important, that they were happy to be invited to participate in the study, and that they were appreciative. A current leader told us:

“If you're going to be a leader and you're training to be a leader, I think it's important to be able to share your voice. And I also think it's it says a lot about [institution] that they're willing to listen to our voices.”

Another participant described the centering of student voice as value added to the program and the caliber of leadership coming out of the program:

"[institution] is building great leaders of the future. We come out of here and we can confidently say, we have the best leaders coming up, coming out of our program, because we honor student voice, and we make the changes that we need to be able to better fit the needs of our students and for them to feel confident."

### **Document Analysis**

Document analysis provided additional information surrounding student voice and assessment in graduate level educational leadership programs. Documents analyzed lacked evidence of guidance related to student voice in assessment practices for graduate programs.

### ***Preparation Program Standards***

As with many other states, the state in which this study took place was operating under the NELP standards for both the building and district levels. These standards are adopted by the state and required for K-12 educational leadership program approval and accreditation. Documents were chosen given that they contain assessment guidance for educational leadership preparation programs at the building and central office levels. In addition, the ELCC standards were analyzed given the transitory nature of the program as it relates to standards.

The NELP standards documents, including both building and district levels, were each analyzed. Specific to assessment, the building-level standards document includes *examples of evidence of candidate competence* (NELP, 2020) for each standard and component to guide programs in collecting evidence. The examples in the document include multiple methods of assessing a candidate, however, do not offer language to include student voice in the development of assessments. The NELP building-level candidate assessment rubric guidance provides detailed information related to the development and use of rubrics, however, language

related to candidate voice is not included. Furthermore, the document references utilizing practitioner and stakeholder input during development and implementation processes, however, not from candidates specifically. No specific confirmation of candidates being included as stakeholders within the document is observed.

The NELP district-level standards include information about assessment types for measuring candidate knowledge as well as guidance for judging evidence. Consistent with building-level NELP standards, examples of rubrics and candidate competence are included, however, no evidence of the inclusion of students as stakeholders is included as it relates to assessment.

The ELCC standards for building and district levels were analyzed based on their influence over leadership preparation programs given that the standards were adopted in 2011 and utilized through 2021 signifying them as important for this study. The use of *student voice*, *choice*, *input*, or *feedback* are not apparent in the document related to assessment of candidates. The standards do highlight flexibility in how programs measure student competency and program evaluation methods based on assessment data.

### ***Accreditation Documents***

The CAEP Advanced-Level Standards and other relevant documents (CAEP 2021; CAEP 2022) were also analyzed. There are five accreditation standards for advanced level educational leadership preparation certification program providers including: (a) content and pedagogical knowledge, (b) clinical partnerships and practices, (c) candidate quality and selectivity, (d) satisfaction with preparation, and (d) quality assurance system and continuous improvement. Standard RA.5, *Quality Assurance system and Continuous Improvement* addresses assessment under subsection RA5.4 *Continuous Improvement* that states “The provider regularly, systematically, and continuously assesses performance against its goals and relevant standards, tracks results over time, documents modifications and/or innovations and their effects on EPP outcomes” (CAEP, 2022, p. 74). As with the NELP standards documents, the CAEP Revised 2022 Standards Workbook includes references to stakeholder input throughout the accreditation and program implementation processes.

The CAEP documents address *student voice*, *choice*, *input*, and *feedback* as it relates to candidate practice in the field and feedback for programming, however, these factors are not included as a potential model for leadership preparation programs specific to assessment.

### ***University and College Guidance Documents***

Analysis of relevant assessment documents and university website resources yielded that the assessment of learning includes multiple definitions (i.e. diagnostic assessment, formative assessment, summative assessment, authentic assessment, and objective assessment) along with evaluation guidance. This evaluation guidance is based on the Kirkpatrick model (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 1994) in which four levels of impact are considered including (a) participant satisfaction/reaction to learning events, (b) participant learning from learning events, (c) participant behavioral change from learning events, and (d) organizational/programmatic results across time with ongoing reinforcement.

The *Understanding Assessment at [Institution]* website was explored. This site includes information related to institution, program, and course-level assessment along with student learning outcomes and student learning more generally, however, no information about student voice or choice related to assessment is addressed, particularly for graduate programs. To investigate university level documents further, the available *Assessment Toolkit* was explored. This toolkit includes guidance on assessment planning (mission, goals, student learning outcomes, measures, targets, and findings) along with defining terminology. Program goal information addresses student voice and choice through guidance on asking questions to inform programming that include student perceptions of the most valuable skills or abilities they have developed and the knowledge they have gained from participation in programs. While these guiding questions include student voice in the evaluation process, student voice to inform the development of assessment systems is not directly addressed.

Included in available resources are multiple specific guidance and example documents in an *Assessment Toolkit Resources Repository* which was analyzed. In total, 30 documents were analyzed including 12 curricular resource documents and eight documents specific to the development of assessment plans. Direct language did not address the use of student voice in assessment design and implementation; however, documents did include topics such as applied experiences, extracurricular learning and assessment, survey methods, and exit interviews.

In general, the document analysis resulted in little to no significant results pertaining to the use of student or candidate voice in the development and implementation of assessment specifically. A summary can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Document Analysis Summary*

Documents	Findings
Educational Leadership Program Recognition Standards: Building Level (ELCC)	No reference to student voice in assessment systems/practices
Educational Leadership Program Recognition Standards: District Level (ELCC)	No reference to student voice in assessment systems/practices
NELP Program Recognition Standards: Building Level	No reference to student voice in assessment systems/practices
NELP Program Recognition Standards: District Level	No reference to student voice in assessment systems/practices
CAEP 2021 Standards for Advanced-Level Programs	Address student voice, choice, input, and feedback as it relates to candidate practice in the field and feedback for programming. Nothing specific to assessment.
CAEP Policy Changes: Accreditation for Advanced-Level Programs documents	
CAEP Revised 2022 Standards Workbook (CAEP, 2021).	
University-level documents (n=30)	Information relating to applied experiences, extracurricular learning and assessment, survey methods, and exit interviews.

## Discussion

Student agency, voice, and choice are not new concepts in education. PK-12 and IHEs have been utilizing student choice and including students in the instructional process for years, however, the design and implementation of assessment is an area that needs further attention in graduate education programs, where the application of theory to practice is valued and where it is critical that students be able to participate in highly relevant assessments that will help them prepare for high levels of participation in the workforce.

This study affirmed that students appreciate the opportunity to provide feedback and voice, particularly related to assessment. Leveraging the knowledge of students who are practitioners in the field of education, with assessment expertise, provided researchers a unique perspective to inform the bridging of student-centered programming with assessments that are practicable and meaningful while meeting accreditation and accountability requirements for educational leadership preparation programs.

The need for IHEs to listen to students is critical and acutely important when faced with ongoing enrollment challenges and the maintenance of relevance to practitioners. It will be paramount for IHEs to provide engaging and authentic learning environments, particularly for working graduate students, that include relevant assessment systems based on student needs and applicability to practice. Furthermore, harnessing the power of decision-making by both students and faculty allows for planning in a manner that encompasses entire programs and the connections of the experience rather than an afterthought about assessing students for accountability purposes only.

## Limitations and Implications for Future Research

There are limitations to this study that stem from the fact that this research includes only one university and that there are limited documents available for analysis related to educational leadership preparation programs specifically. Future studies on this topic could include a multiple case design to provide an even more robust analysis (Yin, 2018).

There is limited literature on the use of student voice in higher education assessment, however, as IHEs compete for student enrollment and strive to continuously improve programming, it is imperative that students are consulted as part of planning and implementation processes. Future research gathering significant information from additional graduate student populations can provide even further insight into student voice and choice. Both quantitative and qualitative measures will be valuable in determining student value in their learning and how they are assessed.

## Implications for Practice

Given that student voice is not common in higher education programmatic improvements (Curl & Cook-Sather, 2021) and that there is perceived value in seeking student perceptions (Blair &

Valdez-Noel, 2014; Bovill et al., 2011; Brooman et al., 2015), there are meaningful implications for practice from this research. The idea that students expressed an interest in experiential and differentiated program assessments, as indicated in findings from this study, offers valuable insight into the development and implementation of assessment. Assessments that represent utility in practice while being differentiated may provide IHEs with a student-focused experience that thoughtfully aligns assessment with course content and practice. Additionally, students reporting value for the inclusion of student voice in the assessment process sheds light on opportunities to utilize student feedback in programmatic decisions. These findings are consistent with previous research related to student ownership and power within IHE programs (Blair & Valdez-Noel, 2014; Boud, 2007; McCleod, 2011).

Furthermore, as programs, universities, and other organizations update and create guiding documents, there may be rich opportunities to include student feedback in processes and practice in a meaningful way that is apparent in relevant documents for educational leadership preparation programs. Intentional feedback gathering could shed invaluable light on assessment practices geared toward meeting the evolving needs of future educational leaders. This could be particularly helpful for topics such as social justice (Lac & Mansfield, 2018; Bertrand & Rodella, 2018) or particularly relevant topics for program candidates.

Focus groups, interviews, and document analysis findings confirm that soliciting student voice for assessment purposes is not typical. Evidence from this study offers a perspective on how student voice and feedback is valued in practice specific to assessment in ways that can be expressed in programs and relevant documents for educational leadership programs.

### **Conclusion**

Qualitative findings from this study provide valuable information related to the use of student voice in assessment development and administration for graduate educational leadership preparation programs. Given the significant gap in the literature around this specific topic and the importance of key assessment use and results, it is imperative that programs consciously elicit student voice to inform programmatic decisions. This allows programs and practitioners to remain relevant in their respective fields and assures students that preparation programs are responsive to their needs and the ever-changing PK-12 educational environments. This is especially true in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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# Influence of Personal and District Characteristics on Superintendents' Freedom to Implement Change, Staff Readiness for Change, and Leadership Styles

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*As schools continue to battle with calls for reform and restructuring, understanding important aspects of change leadership is needed in explaining factors that facilitate successful implementation of planned changes in schools. Certain personal and school district characteristics have been reported in the literature as having impact or influence on school leaders' ability to successfully initiate, lead and/or manage the implementation of change. This study examined the influence of certain personal and district characteristics of Ohio school superintendents' (N = 200) on their perceived freedom to implement change, perceived readiness of staff to implement change, and situational leadership styles. Results of Pearson product-moment correlation, stepwise multiple regression, and ANOVA are presented and discussed.*

*Keywords:* change, characteristics, district, freedom, implement influence, leadership, readiness, school, staff, style, superintendent

Many school reform initiatives that set out to raise standards, increase accountability, lengthen school days, or enhance the rigor of the existing public education system have resulted in changes to only the routine functions and operations of schools (Fullan, 2007; Hawkes et al., 1997; Knaak & Knaak, 2013). Such "first-order" (Cuban, 1988, p. 342) changes—attempts that do not result in significant changes to existing goals and structures—simply made what existed more efficient, without substantially altering the performance and role relationships of staff and students, and without altering the organizational features of the system (Ertmer, 1999; Fullan, 1993, 2001, 2007). According to Cuban (1988), those who propose first-order change "believe that the existing structures of schooling are adequate, desirable and only in need of adjustment" (p. 342).

The challenge to education and school leaders is to avoid maintaining existing conditions and structures, and to initiate "second-order" (Cuban, 1988, p. 343) change—fundamental structural changes that address major dissatisfaction with existing arrangements, structures, programs, and services from within, rather than wait for it to be introduced by an external force (Cuban, 1990; Fullan, 2007; Friedman & Berkovich, 2021; Marzano et al., 2005; Paultz & Sadera, 2017; Taylor & La Cava, 2011). Second-order changes bring about new goals, structures, and roles that transform familiar ways of doing things into new ways of solving persistent problems (Cuban, 1990, 2013; Taylor & La Cava, 2011). The realization of the aims of second-order change in schools, to a great extent, depends upon the willingness of school leaders, especially superintendents, to embrace the proposition and to support it with leadership behaviors that facilitate the readiness of staff to implement such planned change (Cuban, 1990, 2013; Fullan et al., 2005; Tomlinson, 2019). School leaders should be prime movers, take the impetus for change, and articulate the best mandates for staff support and participation in planned change programs (Brown et al., 2012; Cuban, 1990, 2013; Delaney, 1997; Kanter, 1983; Tomlinson, 2019).

As schools continue to battle with calls for reform and restructuring, understanding important aspects of change leadership such as the leadership styles of school superintendents (Cuban, 2013; Devine & Alger, 2011; Fullan, 2007; Hall & Hord, 1987; Hersey & Blanchard, 1988a, 1988b; Owens, 2014; Walker, 1994), their perceived freedom to implement change (Chauvin, 1992; Crawford, 1991; Haro, 1991), readiness of staff for change (Brezicha et al., 2015; Hersey & Blanchard, 1988a, 1988b), and the influence, if any, of district and personal characteristics (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988a, 1988b; Howard et al., 2010; Jenlink et al., 1996; Lederer et al., 2015; Sheppard, 1996; Tomlinson, 2019) on their ability to implement change is needed in explaining factors that facilitate successful implementation of planned changes in schools as well as in explaining school organization response to planned change.

Certain personal and school district characteristics have been reported in the literature as having impact or influence on school leaders' ability to successfully lead and/or manage the implementation of change. They include chronological age, district per pupil expenditure, district per pupil income, highest educational degree of superintendent, number of teachers in the school district, percentage of board members with at least a master's degree, percentage of teachers with at least a master's degree, recruitment status (whether recruited from outside or within the school system), student enrollment, total years as superintendent, type of school district (whether city/urban or local/rural school

district), years of experience as an administrator, years of experience as an educator, years on the current job as superintendent, and perceived readiness of staff for change (this variable was omitted in analysis of data for research question two) (Cuban, 2013; Haro, 1991; Howard et al., 2010; Kerekes, 1993; Lederer et al., 2015; Vail, 1991; Walker, 1994).

This study examined the influence of these personal and school district characteristics on superintendents' perceived freedom to implement change, perceived readiness of staff to implement change, and leadership styles. The study was guided by the following research questions: (1) to what extent do personal and district characteristics, singularly and in concert with each other, influence superintendents' perceptions of the freedom they have to implement planned changes, (2) to what extent do personal and district characteristics, singularly and in concert with each other, influence superintendents' perceptions of subordinates' (other administrators, teachers, and support staff) readiness (as measured by the Readiness Scale: Manager Rating Scale) for planned change, and (3) to what extent do personal and district characteristics relate to superintendents' leadership styles (i.e., their scores as measured by the LEAD-Self instrument) (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988a)?

In the context of this study, superintendents' perceived freedom to implement planned change refers to their composite scores on five items on the questionnaire regarding the degree to which they perceived they had freedom to implement planned changes. Perceived readiness of staff for planned change, as measured by the Readiness Scale instrument (Hambleton et al., 1988), refers to superintendents' perceptions of the ability and willingness of school personnel to self-direct their behavior while engaged in planned change implementation. Leadership style (as measured by the LEAD-Self instrument) is defined as the behavior pattern that school superintendents, as leaders, exhibit when attempting to influence the activities of employees towards the accomplishment of common organizational goals. Two dimensions of situational leadership style (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988b): (a) relationship behavior-the extent to which superintendents are likely to maintain or facilitate productive human relationships within the school organization, and (b) task behavior-the extent to which school superintendents are more likely to organize, define and control the roles and responsibilities of school employees by establishing well-defined patterns of organization, channels of communication, and ways of getting jobs accomplished-are central to the concept of leadership style used in this study.

## **Review of Related Literature**

### **Leadership and Leadership Styles**

Gardner (1990) noted that because leadership is the process of persuasion or example by which an individual (or leadership team) induces a group to pursue objectives held by the leader or shared by the leader and his or her followers, leaders should be thought of in the context in which they exist, in their functional setting, and based on the system over which they preside. Although there are many other different definitions and/or conceptions of leadership, two common denominators seem to exist among them: (a) leadership cannot occur in a vacuum--there must be followers--and (b) leadership is related to the accomplishment of objectives. While some views on leadership emphasize a link between

the prevailing situation and the probability of becoming an effective leader (Beyer, 2012; Bolman & Deal, 2013; Gardner, 1990; Owens, 2014), others espouse that it is a combination of abilities and characteristics as well as the situation that impacted the individual's leadership aptitude (Fiedler & Chemers, 1984; Hersey & Blanchard, 1988b; O'riely & Matt, 2014).

Hersey and Blanchard's (1988b) Situational Leadership theory and its accompanying Leader Effectiveness and Adaptability Description (LEAD-Self) served as the theoretical framework and instrument upon which school superintendents' leadership styles were examined. According to Hersey & Blanchard, one's leadership style involves some combination of task behavior and relationship behavior. They defined task behavior as the extent to which leaders are likely to organize and define the roles of the members of their group (followers) by explaining what activities each is to do and when, where, and how tasks are to be accomplished. It is characterized by endeavoring to establish well-defined patterns of organization, channels of communication, and ways of getting jobs accomplished. Relationship behavior as the extent to which leaders are likely to maintain personal relationships between themselves and members of their group (followers) by opening up channels of communication, providing socioemotional support, psychological strokes, and facilitating behaviors.

These two dimensions of leadership behavior, task behavior and relationship behavior, are cross partitioned to form four styles a leader can use depending on the situation and the maturity level of followers. High task/low relationship leader behavior (S1) is referred to as Telling because this style is characterized by one-way communication in which the leader defines the roles of followers and tells them what, how, when, and where to do various tasks. High task/high relationship behavior (S2) is referred to as Selling because with this style most of the direction is still provided by the leader. He or she also attempts, through two-way communication and socio-emotional support, to get the follower(s) psychologically to buy into decisions that must be made. High relationship/low task behavior (S3) is called Participating because with this style the leader and follower(s) now share in decision making through two-way communication and much facilitating behavior from the leader since the follower(s) have the ability and knowledge to do the task. Low relationship/Low task behavior (S4) is labeled Delegating because the style involves letting follower(s) "run their own show" (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988b, p.117) through delegation and general supervision since the follower(s) are high in both task and psychological maturity. Each of these styles can be effective depending on the situation.

Basic to Situational Leadership theory is an interplay among (a) the amount of direction (task behavior) a leader gives, (b) the amount of socio-emotional support (relationship behavior) a leader provides, and (c) the maturity level that followers exhibit on a specific task (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988b). The maturity level of subordinates is the ability and willingness of people to take responsibility for directing their own behavior-the extent to which a subordinate is willing and able to successfully accomplish a specific task. Hersey and Blanchard (1988b) defined ability as "the knowledge, experience and skill that an individual or a group brings to a particular task or activity" and willingness as "the extent to which an individual or group has the confidence, commitment and motivation to accomplish a specific task" (p. 175). They emphasized that maturity should be considered only in relation

to a specific task to be performed-"an individual or group is not matured or immature in any total sense" (p. 151). Because there is no one best style of leadership for all situations, the maturity level of followers determines the appropriateness of a leadership style. Thus, the maturity level of followers must be determined in order to determine the appropriate style to be used with a group or an individual.

### **Superintendents as Change Leaders**

The 1980s era of school reform, dominated by state and federal initiatives, created a backseat role for superintendents, thereby dampening successful results (Domenech, 2010; Glass, 1992). Also, the emergence of choice movements across America, as well as advocacy for more control at the local level by parents, building administrators, teachers, students, and other interest groups have challenged superintendents' authority and policymaking leadership (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Garcia, 2007; Glass, 1992; Hawkes et al, 1997; The Wallace Foundation, 2010). The authority and freedom of school superintendents to effectively implement organizational changes in school systems seem to be hampered by factors such as (a) encroachment by a more involved citizenry, (b) a wide array of regulatory and legislative mandates, (c) unionization, (d) changing relationships between boards and superintendents, and (e) assumption of greater leadership in formulating policy by boards (Darling-Hammond et al, 2007; Glass, 1992; Walker, 1994). As Glass (1992) noted, often the result is the creation of a "superintendency where leaders often find themselves in continuous defensive posture, both personally and on behalf of their district" (p. 3).

School leaders have the primary responsibility for initiating and managing change abound (Chauvin, 1992; Fullan, 2007; Garcia, 2007; Hall & Hord, 1987; Kerekes, 1993; The Wallace Foundation, 2010). Lunenburg and Ornstein (1991) conducted an analysis of school employee resistance to change and concluded that "the school district leader should be the one to initiate change and provide the ingredients and processes for constructive change" (p. 412). Carlson (1965) elaborated on the significance of the school leader (the school superintendent) in the change process, stating that:

though it is true that a school system as a whole accepts or rejects innovation, the school superintendent is at the focal point in the decision process regarding innovation. Whether he [or she] convinces his [or her] staff or is convinced by them, the superintendent is in a position to make the final decision. (p. 11)

School superintendents have the opportunity to take the impetus for change (internal and external mandates), prioritize them, internalize the concepts, and articulate the best mandates for staff support and participation in planned school change programs (Ash, 2014; Garcia, 2007). The nature of planned changes and how employees, especially teachers, perceive them as fitting into or challenging established beliefs and patterns of behavior influence the degree and manner in which they are rejected, resisted, or accepted (Al-Furaih et al., 2020; Kondakci et al., 2017; Oppi et al., 2022).

In today's schools, planned change is pervasive and necessary, and the attitude and practices of school leaders determine whether change is productive (Al-Furaih et al., 2020; Ash, 2014). Leadership for change requires that the change effort begin at the top with the leader and his or her administrative team making an introspective analysis of their skills,

leadership style, and beliefs about personnel, students, and standards of excellence (Jenlink et al., 1996; Sheppard, 1996; Thurston et al., 1993). Superintendents should have the freedom, as well as every opportunity to implement appropriate planned changes that will make their school districts responsive and educationally outstanding, especially in response to legal mandates, such as No Child Left Behind, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), etc. They should be aware of the interrelationships of their leadership styles and adaptability, freedom to implement planned changes, school structure, and how all these interact to influence the readiness of school personnel to implement planned change programs (US Department of Education, 2015).

## **Method**

### **Population and Sampling**

The target population was superintendents of 614 Ohio school districts (Ohio Department of Education, 2022). School districts were classified as either city/urban or local/rural. City School Districts are those encompassing the territory within the corporate limits of a city, but excluding territory detached for school purposes; while Local School Districts are those that legally depend on a county board of education for service and supervision (Buchter et al., 1991). Superintendents of 191 city school districts and 423 of the local school districts comprised 31% and 69%, respectively, of the target population. To ensure that each school district was represented in the sample in proportion to its numbers in the target population, a proportional, stratified sampling procedure was employed (Frankel et al., 2014). Using a table of random numbers, an initial sampling point for each proportion was selected, and from that point every third city school superintendent in the Ohio Educational Directory (Ohio Department of Education, 2018), and every third local school district superintendent in the directory was included in the sample. This procedure yielded a total of 200 school superintendents: 63 (31%) from city school districts and 137 (69%) from local school districts.

The criterion for being part of the sample was that a respondent (superintendent) must have been on the job as superintendent in the school district for at least two years. This reduced the likelihood of selecting those who had not been in the school system enough to have involved staff in planning and implementing change program(s). The Ohio Educational Directory was used to ensure that each respondent who was randomly selected had been in the school district for at least two years as the superintendent. Superintendents who did not meet this criterion in the initial sampling process were replaced. This process further minimized the chances of rejecting many returned research instruments, though some respondents (two) who met the criteria did not implement planned change in their school districts.

### **Research Instrument**

A three-part questionnaire comprised (a) personal and school district characteristics data section, (b) the Leadership Effectiveness Adaptability Description (LEAD-Self) developed by Hersey and Blanchard (1988a), and (c) the Readiness Scale: Manager Rating Scale developed

by Hambleton, Blanchard, and Hersey (1988). The first part of the survey instrument was designed to (a) collect data about school district and personal characteristics of superintendents, (b) ascertain whether the superintendent had implemented at least one major planned change program in which all or a majority of school district staff were involved (respondents were asked to describe at least one planned change program which they implemented or that was being implemented in the school district), and (c) determine superintendents' rating of their perceived freedom to implement planned change programs.

For purposes of clarity, planned change was defined on the instrument as the altering of behavior, structures, procedures, purposes, or output of some or all units within the school district. Two examples of planned change were provided in the research instrument to guide respondents. Determining whether a superintendent had implemented a planned change program involving most school employees made it possible to exclude any superintendent who had not implemented a planned change program from the study. This exclusion was necessary because the Readiness Scale instrument required that respondents (superintendents) base their perceptions of staff readiness on the involvement of such employees on a major task, in this case, the implementation of a planned change program in the school district. To determine perceived freedom to implement planned change, superintendents were asked to rate, on an eight-point scale, five questions on the degree to which they perceive they had freedom to implement planned change programs. A composite score was determined for each respondent by adding scores on the five questions. The computed composite interval scores represented respondents' degree of perceived freedom to implement planned change scores.

The second part of the instrument measured the leadership styles of school superintendents using the Leadership Effectiveness Adaptability Description (LEAD-Self and other) (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988b). The LEAD-Self is a 12-item leadership-style assessment questionnaire consisting of 12 leader-followers task situations followed by four alternative leader behavior actions. Each of the four alternative actions that follow a situation correspond to one of the four leadership styles (Telling ([S1], Selling [S2], Participating [S3], and Delegating [S4]) identified in Hersey and Blanchard's (1988a, 1988b) situational leadership theory. The minimum and maximum score for each style is 4 and 12, respectively. Respondents' dominant leadership styles were determined by counting and summing the number of times each style was selected. This produced an interval score on each style for every respondent. Summing the responses for each style/column (i.e., Selling, Telling, Participating, and Delegating columns) determined a respondent's dominant style (either Telling, Selling, Participating, or Delegating). In situations where respondents' scores on the four dimensions of the instrument indicated more than one predominant leadership style (e.g., scores of 4 for Selling, 4 for Telling, 3 for Participating, and 1 for Delegating), one style was randomly chosen for each of those respondents using a random number table. In this example, either Selling or Telling would be randomly selected as the respondent's primary leadership style and would be used as his or her dominant leadership style score for data analysis. According to Baker and Campbell (1994), this process prevents bias in the results of the analysis. Only two respondents had equal scores for two styles—Participating and Delegating.

In the third part of the survey instrument, the Readiness Scale: Manager Rating Scale was used to measure superintendents' perceived readiness of their subordinates (staff) to accept and/or implement planned change programs. There are two subscales in the Readiness Scale: (a) Job Readiness and (b) Psychological Readiness. Each subscale contained five questions rated by superintendents on an 8-point response scale. Scores on the two subscales were added together to produce a composite interval score for a respondent's perceived readiness of staff to implement a planned change program. Possible scores for each subscale range from 5 to 40, while possible composite scores for perceived readiness of staff for planned change range from 10 to 80.

**Validity and reliability of instruments.** The LEAD-Self has been extensively used in leadership behavior studies and for training (Greene, 1980; Hambleton et al., 1988; Pascarella & Lunenburg, 1988; Ramos, 1986; Walter et al., 1980). Walter et al (1980) asked 126 elementary school principals to respond to the LEAD-Self in order to test for validity and reliability. Two measures of internal consistency yielded reliability coefficients of .81 and .61, respectively. In a research study by Greene (1980), the LEAD-Self was standardized on the responses of 264 managers/leaders who ranged in age from 21 to 64. Validity scores for the 12 items ranged from .11 to .52, and 10 of the 12 coefficients (83%) were .25 or higher. Each response option met the operationally defined criterion of less than 80% with respect to selection frequency. According to Greene, the stability of the LEAD-Self was moderately strong. In two administrations across a six-week interval, 75% of the managers maintained their dominant style and 71% maintained their alternate style. The contingency coefficients were both .71 and each was significant ( $p \leq .01$ ). The correlation for the adaptability scores was .69 ( $p \leq .01$ ).

Greene maintained that logical validity of the LEAD-Self was clearly established, that scores remained relatively stable across time, that "the user may rely upon the results as consistent measures, [and that the] LEAD-Self is deemed to be an empirically sound instrument" (p. 1). Several empirical validity studies (Blank et al., 1990; Greene, 1980; Norris & Vecchio, 1992; Pascarella & Lunenburg, 1988) which were conducted showed satisfactory results supporting the four style dimensions of the scale.

According to Baker and Campbell (1994), the Readiness Scale: Manager Rating Scale used in conjunction with the LEAD-Self instrument was found to have validity and test-retest reliability coefficients of .62 and .71, respectively. Face validity for the Readiness Scale was based upon a review of the items, and content validity emanated from the procedures employed to create the original set of items (Baker & Campbell, 1994).

### **Data Collection**

Copies of the research instrument were mailed to the 200 randomly selected sample. The return rate after the first mailing of the instrument was 49% (98 responses). A second mailing of the instrument was completed three- and one-half weeks after the first mailing, and the return rate increased to 86% (172 responses out of 200). Of the 172 responses, 162 were usable, bringing the actual return rate to 81%. Of the 10 questionnaires that were not usable, six were completed by respondents who, based on the criterion established (must have been on the job as superintendent for at least two years) earlier for being part of the sample, were

considered unqualified. Two contained incomplete and/or confusing responses, and two were returned uncompleted because the school superintendent vacated his or her job.

### Data Analysis

Pearson product-moment correlation and stepwise multiple regression (forward selection) (Keith, 2006; Mertler & Vannatta, 2005; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007), with research emphasis upon the coefficients of multiple correlation, were used to analyze the data collected. Pearson product-moment correlation was used to determine (at the alpha level of .05) the singular influence of the predictor variables on the criterion variable in the research question, while a stepwise multiple regression (stepwise selection) and the accompanying coefficient of multiple correlation were performed (at alpha level of .10) to determine their collective influence.

### Findings

Of the 162 superintendents whose responses to the instrument of measure were determined to be usable, 108 (66.7%) were superintendents of local school districts and 54 (33.3%) were superintendents of city school districts; 107 (66%) had been recruited from outside their school district; and 55 (34%) had doctoral degrees. Four respondents (2%) used Telling (S1) as their predominant leadership style, 68 (42%) used Selling (S2), 90 (56%) used Participating, and none used Delegating (S4).

The first research question sought to determine the singular and collective influence of the independent variables (personal and district characteristics) on superintendents' perception of the freedom they had to implement district-wide planned change programs. Results of a Pearson product-moment correlation (acting singularly) indicate that of the predictor variables examined, four: (1) type of school district—whether city or local—( $r = .32, p \leq .01$ ), (2) percentage of board members with at least a master's degree ( $r = .29, p \leq .02$ ), (3) recruitment status—whether recruited from within or outside the school district—( $r = .35, p \leq .05$ ), and (4) perceived readiness of teachers for planned change ( $r = .26, p \leq .001$ ) are significantly, at the .05 alpha level, related to superintendents' perceptions of their freedom to implement planned change programs (effect sizes [Ellis, 2009] are .11, .08, .12, & .07 for type of school district, percentage of board members with at least a master's degree, recruitment status, and perceived readiness of teachers for planned change, respectively). Similarly, the results of a stepwise (forward selection) multiple regression (Mertler & Vannata, 2005) show that acting in concert with each other (a) perceived readiness of staff for planned change ( $\beta = .029, R^2 = .069, P < .001$ ), (b) type of school district ( $\beta = 0-.691, R^2 = .103, P < .01$ ), and (c) recruitment status were significantly related to superintendents' perceptions of their freedom to implement change ( $\beta = .283, R' = .12, p < .05$ ) (Table 1). The regression model, though statistically significant but considered not practically significant due to small effect size (Cohen, 1988; Ellis, 2009; Kotrlik et al., 2011; Kotrlik & Williams, 2003) of 12% is:

$$\Delta \quad YPFIPC = .032(PRTPC) - .455(DTYPE) + .300(RS) + 3.965$$

$$\Delta \quad R^2_{Y, 123} \text{ and } R^2_{\Delta Y, 123} = 12\%$$

Where:

PFIPC = Perceived Freedom to Implement Planned Change; PRTPC = Perceived Readiness of Staff for Planned Change; DTYPE = Type of School District (City or local); and

RS= Recruitment Status (Whether recruited from outside or from within the school district).

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed a significant,  $F(1,162) = 5.84, p = .01$  mean difference between city ( $M = 5.44$ ) and local/exempted village ( $M = 5.92$ ) school district superintendents scores. There was also a significant  $F(1,162) = 3.67, p = .05$  mean difference between superintendents ( $N = 55$ ) recruited from within the school district ( $M = 6.02$ ) and those ( $N = 107$ ) recruited from outside the district ( $M = 5.63$ ) in their perceptions of the freedom they had to implement planned change programs. Superintendents who were recruited from within the school district perceived themselves higher as having freedom to implement planned changes than those who were recruited from outside the school district.

**Table 1**

*Summary of Stepwise (Forward Selection) Multiple Regression: Dependent Variable = Superintendents' Perceived Freedom to Implement Planned Change Programs; Independent Variables: Personal and School District Characteristics*

PROCEDURE RESULTS						
Variable	Parameter Estimate	Standardized Coefficient ( $\beta$ )	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F	P
INTERCEPT	3.965				51.51	.00
Perceived Readiness of Staff for Planned Change (Step 1)	.032	.029	.264	.069	11.82	.00***
Type of School District (Step 2)	-0.455	-0.691	.323	.103	5.91	.01**
Recruitment Status (Step 3)	.300	.283	.354	.12	2.38	.05*

\*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$  (one-tailed).

NOTE: Effect size = .12—small (Cohen, 1988; Ellis, 2009; Kotrlik et al., 2011).

The second research question concerned influence of personal and district characteristics on superintendents' perceptions of subordinates' readiness for planned change. The results of a Pearson product-moment correlation at .05 alpha level showed that, acting singularly, only chronological age of superintendents significantly ( $r = .20, p = .02$ ) (effect size = .04-small) influenced their perception of teachers' readiness for planned change implementation. Regarding the extent to which the predictor variables acted in concert with each other, the results of a stepwise (forward selection) multiple regression analysis, at .05 alpha level, indicate that chronological age ( $r = .20, p \leq .05$ ) (effect size = .04-small) and total

years of experience as an educator ( $r = .15, p \leq .03$ ) (effect size = 02-small) were statistically significant influences on superintendents' perceived readiness of staff for planned change implementation. The higher the chronological age and total years of experience as an educator of superintendents, the higher they rated their perceptions of staff readiness for change implementation.

The third research question sought to determine the extent to which the variables (personal and district characteristics) influence superintendents' leadership style scores (i.e., their degree of tendency to use a particular style of leadership as defined by the LEAD-Self instrument) on the dimensions of Telling (S1), Selling (S2), Participating (S3), and Delegating (S4). Results of both a Pearson product-moment correlation analysis and a stepwise (forward selection) multiple regression analysis indicate that none of the predictor variables was significantly related to superintendents' tendency to use either the Telling (S1) or Selling (S2) leadership style. Only years of experience as an administrator was significantly ( $r = .28, p \leq .04$ ) (effect size = .08-small) related to the tendency to use the Participating (S3) style of leadership. Three variables (years as an administrator,  $r = .23, p < .05$  [effect size = .05-small]; recruitment status,  $r = .26, p < .05$  [effect size = .07-small]; and type of school district,  $r = .32, p < .10$  [effect size = .12-small]) were significant in predicting the tendency of superintendents using Delegating (S4) as their predominant leadership style.

Based on the finding that majority of the superintendents used either Participating (S3) or Delegating (S4) leadership styles, an *ex post facto* ("after the fact") analysis was done to see if Participating and Delegating superintendents differed significantly in their scores on the personal and district characteristics. Both a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) for continuous variables and a chi-square test for dichotomous variables (type of school district, highest educational degree, and recruitment status) indicated no significant difference between the two groups.

### **Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusion**

Superintendents' perceived readiness of staff to implement planned change, their type of school district (whether city or local), the percentage of board members having at least a master's degree, and their recruitment status (whether recruited from within or outside the school district) influenced their perceived freedom to implement planned change programs in their school district. The more Ohio superintendents perceived teachers to be ready for planned change, the more freedom they felt they had to implement planned change programs. Local/exempted village school district superintendents appear to perceive they have more freedom to implement planned changes than those of city school districts. Perhaps, because superintendents in local/exempted village school districts have fewer teachers to supervise, smaller student enrollment, more involvement of the community in school activities, and a more homogeneous student body to deal with, they see themselves as having greater freedom to implement planned changes than do superintendents of city school districts.

The findings also suggest that the higher the percentage of board members with at least a master's degree, the greater the superintendents perceived they had freedom to implement planned change programs. This finding, if generally substantiated, could have implications for the community, school boards, superintendents (as change leaders/agents),

and school leadership preparation programs. It may benefit communities to consider the minimum educational qualifications of those they elect to school boards, if superintendent-lead reform or change implementation is perceived to be desirable. Perhaps, superintendents who work with school boards in which most of the members have less than a master's degree should be aware of and examine the impact of such minimum educational qualification when planning change programs. They may also consider giving deserving attention to ways of improving such members' receptivity to planned change.

Superintendents hired from within the school district appear to see themselves as having greater freedom to implement planned change than those hired from outside the district. An explanation of this finding could be that they already had very good understanding of and more trust in employees in the school district prior to becoming its superintendent. Another explanation could be that as former administrators in the school district/system, they already had good knowledge of how to work the system.

Years of experience as a superintendent was not found to be statistically significant in influencing the perceived freedom Ohio superintendents have to implement planned change programs. However, Walker (1994), who studied the autonomy of Tennessee superintendents in directing effective change, found that it was significantly related to the superintendents' freedom to implement planned change—less experienced superintendents reported less freedom to implement change than more experienced ones. Walker's study also led him to conclude, contrary to the findings of this study, that higher educational qualification (above master's degree) was related to the freedom superintendents reported having to implement planned change programs. Like the findings of this study, Walker found that school district setting (urban, suburban, and rural) was related to the extent of freedom superintendents reported having to implement planned change programs. In this study, local school district superintendents perceive themselves to be freer to implement planned change programs than city-school district superintendents.

Superintendents' chronological age and years of experience as an educator were significant influences on their perceptions of school employees' readiness for implementation of planned change programs. The older the superintendent, the greater he or she perceived school employees to be ready for planned change, and the greater the number of years as an educator, the greater the superintendents' likelihood of perceiving staff to be ready for planned change. In contrast, Freitas (1992), who examined the relationship between principals' leadership styles and teacher readiness to change in elementary schools, found that principals' age was negatively related to the reported readiness of teachers to implement change by principals. According to Freitas' findings, principals who were in the younger age group (40-49) seemed to rate their teachers' readiness for planned change higher than those who were older (50-59) and also were males. The contradiction between these two findings could be due to differences between superintendents and principals in their responsibilities, their relationships with teachers, professional training, and experiences. Another explanation could be that because superintendents usually are older and have more professional experience than principals, they had developed more understanding and appreciation of the abilities of school staff to self-direct their behavior while working on a particular responsibility such as implementing a planned change program.

Although findings from this study about influence of certain school district characteristics on Ohio school superintendents' perceived freedom to implement change programs, perceived readiness of staff for change, and leadership styles did not offer very strong statistical relationships between the criterion and the independent variables, there appear to be a need to continue to study systematically the relationships among variables related to leadership and planned change in schools. Such studies will contribute to the explanation of relationships between personal and professional characteristics of school leaders and important school district variables as they interact to influence the implementation of planned change programs. It is recommended that a case study should be conducted to determine why local school district superintendents perceive themselves to have more freedom to implement planned change programs than city school superintendents.

Also, a causal-comparative study may be conducted to investigate further the findings that (a) the higher the percentage of board members with at least a bachelor's degree in the district, the higher the superintendents rated their freedom to implement planned change programs in the district; and (b) superintendents hired from within the school district reported greater freedom to implement planned changes than those hired from outside the district. Further examination of these issues could inform school boards, superintendents, administrator preparatory programs, and the community in ensuring that schools are better able to respond to calls for change or reform. Most important, a study of superintendents who have successfully implemented multiple planned change programs in their school districts should be conducted to determine the degree to which board members' highest educational qualification was a significant factor when implementing change programs.

As society, the curriculum, students' needs, the workforce, technology, the economy, and other factors change school leaders become aware of the constant pressure to bring about change in schools (in curricula, in personnel performance, and in standards). School superintendents, as school organization leaders, must find new ways of meeting the need for change in order to maintain the relevance and responsiveness of schools. Change in schools is inevitable and often desirable and depending on whether it is planned or merely a reaction to internal or external pressures, its effect can be drastically different. Effective planned change requires deliberate decision making and implementation strategies rather than haphazard acceptance of faddish projects and ideas. Because schools are complex and modeled by increasingly fluid and disorderly environmental forces that constantly threaten their rationally ordered structures and goals, the success in implementing planned changes lies in having a particularly effective person who can mobilize people to overcome the resistance that the system reflexively generates.

As schools brace for reform and change, leaders and scholars of school administration and leadership need to understand the interaction or relationship, if any, between school superintendents' ability and readiness to implement change and variables such as leadership style, perceived freedom to implement planned change, readiness of school staff for change, etc. Such understanding is needed in explaining factors that facilitate successful implementation of planned changes in schools as well as in explaining school organization response to planned change.



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# Redesigning Principal Preparation: A Case Study of the ASU Educational Leadership Tier II Program

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*Over the past five years, Albany State University (ASU) has reconstituted its Education Specialist Leadership Tier II Program to prepare school principals to work in some of the least served schools in southwest Georgia (and, as described below, outside of Georgia as well). Prior to the redesign of the program, ASU was struggling with a limited number of applicants who met state requirements for enrollment, such as Tier I certification and a school leadership position. The redesign focused on a vision for a program that would be aligned to the best current thinking on the preparation of principals. This thinking included balancing authentic leadership experiences embedded in clinical practice, individualized guidance and mentorship from experts, and close partnerships with the school districts in which graduates were most likely to work upon graduation. This case study tells the story of what ASU did and how they accomplished this herculean task.*

*Keywords:* educational leadership program, partnerships, continuous improvement

## **Author Note**

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Increasingly, school reformers are recognizing the central role school leadership can play in improving America's schools. A recent meta-analysis of the impact of school leaders (Grissom et al., 2021) found that while leadership is second only to teaching among school influences on student success, principals may be even more critical because of the potential for leadership to impact multiple classrooms of students. Acknowledging this impact of school leadership on student achievement raised awareness in school districts and higher education institutions on the importance of leadership training and preparation. Principal preparation is the pathway for aspiring principals to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they need to be effective school leaders. More than two decades of research finds; however, that university-based preparation can lack rigor and relevance. A survey of American Association of School Administrator (AASA) members revealed that some 80 percent were dissatisfied with the quality of candidates available from principal preparation programs (Mendels, 2016). For over 20 years, the research and evaluation literature on principal preparation programs has emphasized the need for redesign (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2007; Elmore, 2000; Levine, 2005; Peterson, 2002). Only recently, and with substantial philanthropic support, have a small number of universities undertaken this kind of ambitious redesign.

Over the past ten years, several studies (summarized by Mendels, 2016) have focused on the role of school leaders and their impact on student achievement (Anderson & Turnbull, 2019; Bartanen, 2020; Bartanen & Grissom, 2019; Bartanen, et al., 2019; Gates, et al., 2019; Grissom, et al, 2019; Grissom, et al., 2021; Turnbull, et al., 2016). Five major themes have emerged from these studies that address the need to redesign university principal preparation programs: (1) as noted above, district leaders are largely dissatisfied with the quality of principal preparation programs, and many universities believe that their programs have room for improvement; (2) strong university-district partnerships are essential to high-quality preparation but are far from universal (Wang, et al., 2018); (3) the course of study at preparation programs does not always reflect principals' real jobs (Herman, et al., 2022); (4) some university policies and practices can hinder change (National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020); and (5) states have authority to play a role in improving principal preparation, but many are not using this power as effectively as possible (Gates, et al., 2020).

The Wallace Foundation, a national philanthropy that has worked on school leadership since 2000, instituted a university principal preparation initiative (UPPI) driven by the idea that principals have a crucial role in fostering student achievement and is based on the five themes that emerged from the studies (Mendels, 2016). Faced with numerous challenges and threatened closure of the ASU Educational Leadership Tier II Program, ASU applied for and was awarded one of UPPI grants to redesign their Educational Leadership Tier II Program.

This case study seeks to unpack the ways in which ASU transformed its principal preparation program from one that could not recruit enough candidates to one that stands as a model for other education leadership programs and now draws students from across multiple states. More precisely, this article addresses these research questions:

- In what ways did ASU redesign its preparation program, especially with regard to candidate recruitment and selection, curriculum, clinical experiences, and partnering with key stakeholders?
- How did the redesign team engage ASU administrators and faculty to support these changes?

- What contextual factors contributed to or helped facilitate change in the program?

## **Background**

### **Albany State University (ASU)**

ASU, part of the University System of Georgia, is a proud historically black institution. ASU is now one of the largest Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the country and the largest in Georgia with enrollment of 6,400. Located in southwest Georgia, ASU serves more than 26 diverse school districts ranging in size from 15,600 students to as few as 300 students. The region is one of the poorest in the nation. In a message delivered to the ASU Faculty Senate, Dr. Arthur Dunning, former President of Albany State University, quoted a report written by the Carl Vinson Institute of Government at the University of Georgia (Carl Vinson Institute of Government, 2017) noting that there are more families living in poverty in the 2nd Congressional District, which is where ASU is located, than in any other district in Georgia. Historically, ASU's program to prepare school principals suffered from chronically low enrollment and adherence to outdated approaches to preparing principals. Consequently, the university closed the program in 2018 until the educational leadership degree program was redesigned.

### **Georgia Standards and Program Requirements**

ASU uses the Georgia Educational Leadership Standards and Elements (GELS) (Georgia Professional Standards Commission, 2019) adapted from the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015) as the basis for program curricula. These standards, as well as the elements that accompany them, are reflected in planning forms, catalogs, syllabi, key assessments, and program design. Additional standards (national and state) as well as school district needs were also used in developing and implementing program curricula and clinical experiences at the appropriate levels. Standards include the National Educational Leadership Program Standards, Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) Leader Performance Assessment Standards, Leader Keys Effectiveness System, Teacher Keys Effective System, Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward), Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium Model Core Teaching Standards, Teacher Leader Standards, Model Principal Supervisor Standards and Turnaround Competencies, and the educator preparation provider conceptual framework.

Georgia has a two-tier licensure structure. Tier I licensure allows candidates to apply for school-level administrative positions below the principalship or district-level administrative positions not involving the supervision of principals. Tier II licensure is for those already in an administrative position including the principalship, the superintendency, and other administrative posts that involve the supervision of principals.

### **ASU Educational Leadership Tier II Program**

The opportunity for the Educational Leadership Program in the School of Education at ASU to prepare effective leaders is paramount to the improvement of lives of students and families in

the region and beyond. The university administrators saw the need to develop and implement a high-quality learning sequence and develop stronger university/school-district collaborations and to do so in concert with the GaPSC. The GaPSC is the sole conductor of performance reviews for educator preparation programs in Georgia and is responsible for ensuring that principal preparation programs are aligned to licensing requirements and leadership standards.

The goal of the ASU Educational Leadership Tier II Program is to prepare candidates for the role of principal or other school/district leaders who evaluate other leaders. This program is an educational specialist program that provides just-in-time seminars and cohort learning through sequenced online instruction with clinical experiences with support throughout the program at the school or district level. Tier II certification candidates must complete at least 750 clinical hours, per Georgia state regulation.

The ASU Educational Leadership Tier II program is rooted in the belief that successful leaders are impactful, culturally-responsive, technologically-competent, and reflective practitioners dedicated to continuous school improvement and equity for all students, including the underserved. To continuously improve upon the identification, selection, preparation, and development of principal candidates and those who become leaders, this program provides intentional, purposeful experiences and engages with the districts in their service area to graduate individuals who are competent, skilled school leaders who lead through an equity lens.

## Methods

The study employed a case study approach, defined by Yin (2014) as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) in depth and within its real-world context” (p.85). The study team consisted of two senior practitioner-researchers (Carthon and Daniels) who were deeply involved in the redesign process and three external/independent researchers. Primary data were collected by the external researchers.

The study team conducted interviews and focus groups with key actors and partners. The team conducted four (4) focus groups and seven (7) individual interviews with university officials, state and district officials, Redesign Task Force team members, and redesign support partners. In total, data were collected from 18 individuals. Focus group and interview data were transcribed and coded using otter.ai. The research team also reviewed and analyzed documents related to the redesign such as meeting presentations and notes, grant reports, and previous interviews conducted with partners and students.

Given the small number of transcripts and documents, data analysis was conducted in Excel rather than purpose-built qualitative research software. Two researchers used an initial coding scheme to code three transcripts. After the initial coding, the researchers met to discuss coding efficacy and revised accordingly. The pair coded the remaining data and regularly met to review and ensure consistency in coding. The final coding scheme is shown below.

- Background
  - Impetus
  - ASU History
  - Redesign Goals
  - Additional Context
- Management

- Redesign
  - Curriculum
  - Recruitment/Selection
  - Faculty Roles
  - Partnerships
  - Program Content
- Continuous Improvement
- Outcomes
- University Activities
  - Rebranding

Once coded, the team met to identify and debate potential findings.

## **Findings**

### **The Wallace Foundation Grant**

In July 2016, the ASU College of Education, Department of Counseling and Educational Leadership was awarded a \$5.2 million UPPI grant funded by The Wallace Foundation. This grant, ending in December 2022, has provided funding for ASU to create a partnership network with three districts they serve (Pelham City Schools, Calhoun County School System, and Dougherty County School System), members of the Statewide UPPI, ASU Redesign Task Force, Georgia UPPI Professional Learning Community, ASU Educational Leadership Advisory Council, University System of Georgia, GaDOE, GaPSC, UPPI six universities, and other Wallace Foundation network. All of these partners have contributed significant time and expertise to redesign the ASU Educational Leadership Tier II Program that is evidenced-based and focused on equitable practices and leading with equity in preparing principals.

Several internal and external factors prompted the ASU Educational Leadership Tier II program redesign. Externally, changes in the national and state standards (PSEL and GELS) for educational leadership programs had sparked an interest in the administration of the ASU Educational Leadership Tier II Program. Before the adaptation of the GELS, the ASU Tier II program was ahead of the curve and had already begun participating in a statewide initiative involving university principal preparation programs in self-assessing their curriculum and practice. Supported by The Wallace Foundation and the Education Development Center, Inc.'s Quality Measures Self-Study, ASU, along with other Georgia Leadership Programs, identified areas for program improvement and the need for updated research-based curriculum and clinical experiences in their Tier II leadership program. Simultaneously, the state professional standards commission was in the process of making changes to their standards and state rules requirements for program approval. The new program approval requirements aligned to the Quality Measures domains, and indicators helped to promote the movement to “redesign” the ASU Educational Leadership Tier II Program.

The external support from The Wallace Foundation provided not just financial resources, but more importantly, access to an experienced facilitator to act as a critical supporter and a network of programs undertaking similar transformations with whom ASU could engage in conversation about change. The Project Director knew that The Wallace Foundation studies the

regions of the country and looks for district and university programs that are “the best fit for their initiatives....The Wallace Foundation knew the state of Georgia and its situation in terms of changes that were taking place and that ...the environment and climate in the state would allow us to do what we needed to do in terms of redesigning our program.”

Internally, the loss of candidates in the program and the need to update the content to meet the needs of future principals and district leaders demanded a need for change. As the program enrollment dwindled, it became apparent that candidates were looking for current, proven strategies conducted by school leaders that led to improved student achievement. ASU had to redesign their program to meet the new program approval guidelines and the desires of aspiring school leaders. There was a strategic need to serve school districts in this small, rural area of southwest Georgia. An ASU Redesign Task Force member and district partner explained, “We really wanted to tailor a program that was going to meet the needs of southwest Georgia, and requirements in Georgia as a whole.” Another district Task Force member stated, “I don't think [the program] aligned well to the real work of what was happening in schools. So, they wanted to increase the rigor of the program, in order to better serve the area. It was one of the programs that we could get to that was accessible for folks in that area. It was the only program that we had access to...if you look at the quality of schools in that area, there was also a need to improve leadership.”

Another internal factor was the result of the merger between ASU and Darton College. This merger created an urgency to reassess all of ASU's programs. The timing of the merger and the opportunity to apply for a Wallace Foundation UPPI grant were in sync. The ASU Educational Leadership Tier II Program team knew that the UPPI grant would give them the needed resources to redesign the program and launch a new branding campaign for the program.

Perhaps the most important internal support came in the form of stable leadership from the project director to drive change. A district partner and key player in the redesign shared that “the saving grace of this [work] is Dr. Janis Carthon. She is the stable person...If she had left, this would have just collapsed, because she is the consistent person driving this work forward and you need that stability, especially in an environment where they [ASU] had a lot of turnover in the leadership.” Another university administrator believed that “through all those changes that [have taken place at the university] the [UPPI] core team, ... and the partners, ... persevered, and they met religiously and frequently.” The collaboration between the UPPI facilitator and ASU UPPI Project Director was also critical to continuing the work amidst the change in leadership at the university level. A GaDOE partner and task force member noted that “It was very obvious that the Wallace facilitator who was an external person ... and the point person at Albany State had a very good, strong working relationship.” He found this relationship instrumental in keeping the work focused against all odds and forging forward.

### **Redesign Process: Goal and Process**

ASU's principal preparation program was redesigned to include high-quality learning experiences aligned to the Georgia Educational Leadership Standards, the needs of school districts, and the pre-assessed learning needs of each candidate. Before the redesign, there were no cross-cutting themes, and the program lacked a learning sequence and a “true partnership.” ASU and its partners worked diligently on a program with an intentional purpose, coherence, and alignment

to standards and district needs with attention to closing the equity gap. The sequences of learning have five cross-cutting themes: turnaround strategies, an equity lens, data-informed processes, reflective leadership, and regulatory alignment. Sequences of learning were prioritized and grouped to provide coherent learning experiences acquired from semester to semester. Additionally, sequences of learning were aligned to school leaders' daily and monthly duties and responsibilities. As a result of these cross-cutting themes, the program has purpose, coherency, a logical sequence, standards alignments, and a process of continuous improvement.

The cross-cutting themes were defined. *Data-informed processes and use* include examining and using a variety of performance data to make decisions for school improvement. *Equity* refers to measuring and monitoring achievement, fairness, and educational opportunities for students to ensure that there are no concrete or perceived barriers to learning opportunities. *Turnaround* refers to leading change to improve organizational structures, processes, and pedagogy to improve school performance. *Reflection* refers to the candidates' ability to think about their knowledge, skills, and behaviors in order to improve their leadership acumen and positively impact the performance of the schools they serve. *Alignment to the Regulatory Context* ensures that candidates will learn about the local, state, and federal laws, policies and regulations as well as state initiatives impacting school leadership. Each course incorporates these five themes into the content and coursework providing classroom content and clinical experiences that are designed around the context of the cross-cutting themes.

Georgia's Continuous Improvement Framework, developed and administered by the GaDOE, along with the school improvement frameworks of other program participant states are an essential and critical component of the school improvement planning, monitoring, and evaluation expected of state, school, and district leaders (Georgia Department of Education, 2021). In this preparation program, leader candidates have opportunities to understand their state's continuous improvement process and the context within which it operates. Candidates have guided practice in implementing activities related to the continuous improvement process during their clinical experiences and in the analysis, design, implementation, and evaluation of the individual School Improvement Instructional Change Project which is a key assessment in the program.

The Leadership Candidate Support Team (LCST) is a group of on-site mentors, leadership coaches, the clinical director, and university faculty who are well-versed in the continuous improvement framework providing Tier II candidates with in-depth performance-based learning opportunities and support as a part of their clinical experiences. Candidates are guided cooperatively by the LCST to include appropriate opportunities to demonstrate knowledge, skills, and dispositions reflective of current leadership research and program standards. This provides significant opportunities for candidates to demonstrate leadership dispositions, synthesize and apply knowledge, and practice and develop the skills identified in the Georgia Educator Preparation Rule 505-3-.77, the 2018 GELS adapted from the PSEL and LKES. Also, program candidates from other states are supported within clinical experiences aligned to the PSEL. Substantial, sustained, standards-based work in real settings and in real time are planned and guided cooperatively by the higher education institution and school district personnel for graduate credit or certificate only.

## **Partners and Roles**

The ASU partnerships included a diverse group of partners. Three school districts were integral to the process: Calhoun County School System, a small, rural, high poverty, high minority district of only 700 students; Pelham City School System, a medium-sized, rural, high poverty, high minority district of 1500 students; and Dougherty County School System, a large, urban/metropolitan, high minority, high poverty district of 15,000 students joined ASU in the grant submission phase and have continued to support the initiative throughout the life of the grant and beyond. ASU has many alumni in teaching and leadership positions and a long history of partnerships with each district.

The Partner School Districts played a variety of roles throughout the life of the UPPI. The superintendent or a designee served as a co-principal investigator on the initiative as part of the leadership team. In addition, other district administrators served on the initiative Redesign Task Force and working group sharing information and their expertise, while also providing a critical friend's perspective.

The redesign process included voices of not only local partners, but also national and state partners. State partners included the GaPSC, GaDOE, and University System of Georgia (USG). Additional support partners included Quality-Plus Leader Academy—Gwinnett (GA) County Public Schools, Leadership Academy (formerly New York Leadership Academy), and University Council of Educational Administration (UCEA). These partners were invaluable to the project, as they provided input and feedback from across the state and the country as well as offering expert advice concerning legal and legislative policies, practices, and program approval requirements. Throughout the project, this collaborative partnership contributed to the brainstorming, planning, development, and initial implementation decision making process. ASU was transparent and open to collaboration and feedback from all their partners. This open and honest dialogue is another key feature of the project and a reason for some of the early wins and success of the program.

The first two years of the five-year redesign process required the team to organize and create a vision for change. The project director and facilitator oversaw the redesign process. The structure of the redesign team included the main UPPI team comprised of multiple state education agency representatives, university education leadership faculty and program administrators, district administrators/supervisors, school principals and leadership team members, and The Wallace Foundation network. UPPI team members were organized into small subgroups: a core team that managed the administrative aspects of the redesign and task force teams of experts who focused on specific areas or tasks. Also, an advisory council comprised multiple state and regional education agency directors, program managers, and district superintendents, and the university provost who advises and provides feedback on key items. This approach helped to sustain continuous improvement and partnership support.

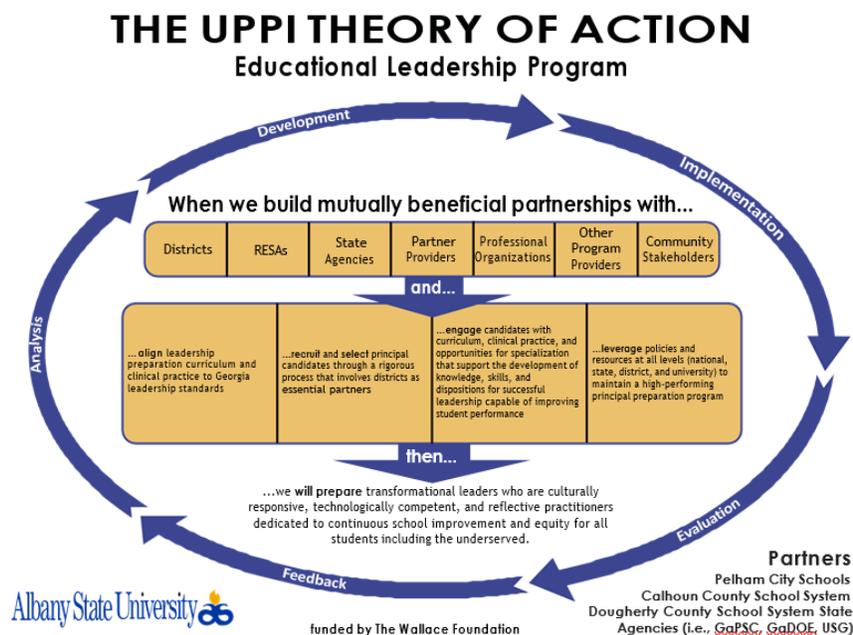
The redesign team created a theory of action and logic model for the program redesign, which was the guiding force for the work (see Figure 1 and Figure 2, respectively). Based on these documents, focus group interviews were held with all of the identified partners and organizations that would be impacted by the redesign. The focus groups were critical to figuring out what the “customers” (partner districts) needed from their school leaders. External consultant reflecting on the process stated, “The redesign team realized from the very beginning that this work could not be done in isolation; therefore, cultivating and managing relationships with internal and external stakeholders was crucial. [The team also] realized that they couldn't exist or remain in

existence being a standalone, [so the Task Force] really had to connect to school districts around them, [since these were] their customers.”

The partners had a disposition of collaboration and willingness to engage in the work. Engaging all the necessary partners in this redesign process promoted investment and buy-in among them. A leader of the Educator Preparation Division at GaPSC, commenting on the importance of the partnership, stated, “... the partnership piece was also a critical component throughout ... The P-12 partners were heavily engaged and were .... drivers of the redesign because the intent was to make the program fit the needs of the P-12 community.”

There was mutual investment and interest in the advancement of the southwest Georgia region. Building a program that meets the needs of the districts, strengthens the regional pipeline, and increases the skills and knowledge of the individuals enrolled in the programs brought the university, the programs, and the partner districts together. The partner districts were drawn to the perk of building leaders internally, as not to have to continue hiring externally. A district partner explained that “We were in need...[of] some type of principal prep program that would help our internal colleagues be prepared to step into those leadership roles. The whole southwest Georgia [region]...we want ... to prosper. And right now, we know that southwest Georgia is one of the lowest performing areas in the whole nation...So we felt like ... even if our people do get the training and then eventually leave us. It'll be okay ... because it's for the greater good.”

**Figure 1**  
*Theory of Action*



*Note.* This figure shows the elements of the UPPI theory of action. As part of the redesign of the educational leadership program, the ASU team and its partners developed a logic model. A logic

model is a systematic and visual way to present and share the understanding of the relationships among the resources available to operate the program, the plan activities, and the changes or results hope to achieve (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004).

**Figure 2**  
*Logic Model*

**Albany State University (ASU) Logic Model**



**Program:** Educational Leadership  
**Situation:** The processes and standards by which many principal preparation programs traditionally screen, select, and graduate candidates are often ill-defined, irregularly applied, and lacking in rigor. As a result, many aspiring leaders lack essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to successfully lead schools to improve student performance, especially in under-served schools. (Wallace, 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2013; NCATE, 2002).  
**Goal:** The Educational Leadership Program at ASU is rooted in the belief that successful leaders are transformational, culturally responsive, technologically competent, and reflective practitioners dedicated to continuous school improvement and equity for all students, including the under-served. By engaging in mutually beneficial partnerships with participating districts and other stakeholders and developing intentional purposeful experiences, we can continuously improve upon the identification, selection, preparation, and development of equity-minded principal candidates and other educators who become leaders in partner school districts.

Resources	Resources/Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes			Impact (25+)			
				Short (2018-20)	Medium (2020-23)	Long (2023-25)				
ASU support, administrators, faculty, staff, and university services UPPI program graduates Partnering school district liaisons Regional Educational Service Agencies (RESAs) State agency representatives Advisory Council The Wallace Foundation support Professional Organizations Governor's Office and Key Legislative Leaders Alliance of Education Agency Heads (AEAH) National Organizations Local Businesses and Community Organizations	ASU administrators, faculty staff, consultants, and graduates; district liaisons, state and UCEA representatives, partner providers School of Education full-time and part-time faculty (practitioners) and staff, partnering school district representatives, UPPI program graduates Georgia education policy, state and national leadership standards, UPPI partner/ expert providers, advisory council, district partners and ASU faculty Program clinical director and coordinator in collaboration with school district partners ASU faculty, district liaisons, RESAs, local, state agencies, and key stakeholders Georgia and national education policies including leadership standards	Weekly/monthly UPPI team meetings, monthly faculty meetings, annual team plus faculty retreat, semi-annual advisory council meetings Recruit, select, prepare qualified, effective faculty, staff, candidates, mentors, and coaches; establish entry/ completion requirements; develop brand, marketing program; recruitment strategy and selection procedures; align professional learning activities to redesigned program Develop, facilitate and coordinate the delivery of purposeful, coherent, evidence based content, clinical and professional learning experiences (assignments and projects), forms and materials, key identifiers/rubrics aligned to Georgia and national educational standards; develop program review and evaluation system such as focused interviews with candidates, faculty, and staff using an independent evaluator and Quality Measures Self-Study Facilitate and coordinate high quality professional learning experiences aligned to Georgia and national educational leadership standards and program approval rules as well as linked to the performance of individual candidates Leverage policies and resources at all levels (national, state, district, and university) to maintain a high-performing principal preparation program	A redesigned principal preparation program that incorporates research-based curriculum and instruction, along with partner engagement in recruitment and selection of candidates capable of improving student performance and ensuring equitable treatment of all students Unique brand, updated Web page incorporating new brand materials and program information; aggressive multi-state recruitment efforts, structured selection process, rigorous, standards-based and performance-oriented curriculum; effective instructional team that includes faculty, staff, mentors, and coaches Certified candidates capable of improving student performance and assuring equitable treatment of all students; a comprehensive program manual; Leadership Candidate Support Team Guide; strong partnership agreements customized for each partner; purposeful, coherent, evidence based program built around a cohort model and equity framework An ongoing process of analysis (including predictive analytics), development, evaluation, and feedback on the educational leadership program and candidate/graduate performance. Leader Tracking System; instruments that measure candidates' knowledge, skills, and dispositions; district partners' evaluation of the program Professional learning community that includes candidates, graduates, district partners, university faculty, and other stakeholders Program alignment to national, state, and district standards	Seek and complete program approval from all stakeholders: university's committees, GaPSC, USG, etc.	Implement the inaugural redesigned program Increase training opportunities for mentors and coaches so that the ratio of coaches to candidates remains no greater than 1:10 and the ratio of mentors to candidates is no greater than 1:3 Refine content and clinical practice aligned to national, state, and district standards Provide virtual professional learning opportunities aligned to Georgia educational leadership standards, and program approval rules	Enrollment of at least 10 candidates per cohort 100% of new graduates and at least 80% of graduates continue to promote continuous school improvement and equity in their schools or districts At least 80% of districts report satisfaction with ASU graduates and their work 100% passage on state-required certification exam ASU graduates continue to move into higher positions in current or new school districts At least 80% of candidates and graduates report high satisfaction with the redesigned educational leadership program Creation of a pipeline of equity-centered principal candidates in southwest GA and neighboring counties	Significant improvement in leader and teacher development and instructional effectiveness through a focus on emotional health, equity and cultural responsiveness Significant improvement in student achievement and overall school performance among diverse student groups, especially under-served and marginalized populations Significant improvement on major equity measures, including but not limited to, diversity of instructional staff, parent satisfaction and engagement, student satisfaction and engagement, faculty and staff satisfaction and engagement Other higher education institutions in states where our graduates reside adopt equity as a major/important component of educational leadership programs			
				Increase the number of prepared and qualified mentors and coaches so that the ratio of coaches to candidates is no greater than 1:3		80% of participants are able to articulate effectiveness of the professional learning and how it will be used for improvement(s)		Content and clinical experiences aligned to national and state standards, and district needs	Candidates and in-service leaders provide high-quality professional learning experiences based on school and student performance data, aligned to Georgia and national educational leadership standards and Georgia program approval rules	Content and clinical practice aligned to national, state, and district standards
				Aligned professional learning activities		80% of participants are able to articulate effectiveness of the professional learning and how it will be used for improvement(s)		Content and clinical experiences aligned to national and state standards, and district needs	Candidates and in-service leaders provide high-quality professional learning experiences based on school and student performance data, aligned to Georgia and national educational leadership standards and Georgia program approval rules	Content and clinical practice aligned to national, state, and district standards
				Aligned professional learning activities		80% of participants are able to articulate effectiveness of the professional learning and how it will be used for improvement(s)		Content and clinical experiences aligned to national and state standards, and district needs	Candidates and in-service leaders provide high-quality professional learning experiences based on school and student performance data, aligned to Georgia and national educational leadership standards and Georgia program approval rules	Content and clinical practice aligned to national, state, and district standards
<b>Assumptions</b>				<b>External Factors</b>						
Principals create the conditions to improve teacher practice and student performance and school culture (Mendels, 2013). School leaders who are properly prepared and supported will have a positive impact on teaching practices, retention, and student performance as compared to others who have not received comparable preparation and support.				Merger, administrative changes, and the historical perception of the University. District personnel turnover.						

**Note.** The logic model including four components: resources, activities, outputs, and outcomes served as anchors for the UPPI work.

### Recruitment and Selection Changes

The ASU leadership program had taken a multi-pronged approach to recruiting and selecting candidates for the Tier II program. In reality, though, it was the same approach that most other universities use. To recruit candidates, the program typically hosted its own recruitment fairs, participated in other recruitment fairs across the state, distributed information at professional conferences, encouraged superintendents to recommend the program to district prospects, solicited recommendations via electronic newsletters to alumni, and encouraged current students and graduates of the program to help spread the word. While this approach had been somewhat successful, the program had remained fairly small and could not pull away from the competition, which is plentiful in the southeastern area of the state. To break away from the pack, the program realized that they would have to overhaul the recruitment strategies and

develop a detailed recruitment plan with specific actions and responsibilities assigned to program and university personnel.

In collaboration with partners, ASU designed and implemented a highly selective two-phase approach that included individual and group interviews as well as an on-demand writing assessment that focused on instructional leadership and teacher feedback in Phase I. Now, applicant readiness is determined using a rigorous, valid, and reliable process, which has resulted in a plan for recruiting and selecting candidates for the principal preparation program. Specific instruments were developed using identified selection criteria and activities aligned to standards. There is a data collection system, and members on the selection committee are trained.

Prior to the Phase I Selection Process, ASU colleagues, along with district and program partners, participate in a three-hour training session to review the selection process components and scoring criteria. All assessment participants are provided a Phase I agenda, and their assignments for individual interviews, on-demand writing/teacher feedback submissions, and candidate observations during the group interview. This is an evolving process and has gone from a fully in-person selection process to a fully online selection process. As the program grows and the number of program candidates increases, graduates are volunteering to participate in the Phase I Selection Process as a gesture of giving back to the program. The first group of program graduates to participate began with the 2021-2022 Cohort 4 applicants.

The redesign team changed its candidate selection process to recruit and select candidates who had a readiness, the experience, and the capacity to make them successful in the redesigned program. A former GaPSC director involved in these changes reflected on some of the reasons why the recruitment and selection process was redesigned, "...the idea was not more coming into the program just because you have a check and can pay the tuition. The idea was, let's recruit people who have an interest in leadership, and already have some dispositions that would suggest that they might be good leaders."

In terms of recruitment, ASU had believed that their relationship with the partner districts would allow them to try a more targeted, district-based approach to recruitment. Efforts were made to solicit district cohorts, starting with the three partner districts. This approach, however, was not successful for several reasons. First, two of the districts were too small to develop a cohort of candidates on their own, and there were only forty-four candidates in the state of Georgia that were eligible for the Tier II program when ASU began recruiting for the first cohort of the redesigned program. Also, school districts in the ASU service area were not focused on developing principal pipelines, which would have provided a resource for possible applicants.

These challenges along with perception and program organizational issues prompted a full-scale redesign of their marketing strategies and recruitment plan. Because of the limited number of Georgia candidates eligible for the program, ASU realized that to grow the program and serve more candidates, they needed to expand their service area and recruit from outside the state of Georgia. Now in the third year of the redesigned program, ASU candidates in Cohort 3 come from South Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee, and Mississippi, as well as Georgia. The program is continuing to expand its outreach to include other states, armed services candidates, and international candidates.

## **Changes in Curriculum**

Prior to the ASU Tier II Redesign, the faculty used a variety of andragogic techniques to present information and facilitate learning in the classroom and online. However, while techniques such as case studies, problem-based learning, small and large group discussions, guest speakers, shadowing, workshops, seminars, and technology integration were used, the extent of use was not consistent across all instructors. The redesign efforts made a significant impact in this area by using practitioners as faculty because their field experience could speak to current issues facing school leaders. The team also recommended the employment of leadership coaches and a clinical director who are actively involved in present day P-12 protocols and research-based practices.

After several months of having the program analyzed, self-assessed, and externally reviewed and numerous sessions on the research and components of a high-quality educational leadership program, ASU determined that the program needed to start with a clean slate. This was not to be the task of revising or updating the program, but a clean sweep and overhaul of the program. With the use of a blank whiteboard and chart paper, the Redesign Task Force began to identify what a principal today needs to know and be able to do.

The redesign team aimed to develop a revised curriculum that equipped today's administrators with the skills to tackle the current challenges in education and to respond to the specific needs of partner school districts. The redesign team addressed standards alignment and enhancements. The curriculum, instruction and assessment, and clinical experiences for the ASU Educational Leadership Tier II program were aligned to district needs and the GELS that were adapted for the PSEL in 2018. Additional national and state standards mentioned in the Georgia Standards and Program Requirements are reflected in the program redesign.

Their criteria centered around content that was research-based and relevant for leaders in the partner school districts. Activities such as curriculum mapping, development of Key Assessments, and identification of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions highly effective principals must demonstrate were identified by the Redesign Task Force and used to create a framework for the redesign. Next, each of these components were aligned to the competencies defined by the 2015 Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). To achieve this alignment, all of the information was "chunked" and reordered to decide on the content and title for each course. From there, performance outcomes/competencies were created for each course and aligned to the GELS, which had adopted PSEL and adapted the elements to support the incorporation of PSEL in Georgia.

The Redesign Task Force sequenced courses that aligned to strategic times in the academic year of a school leader ("a year in the life") and the work happening in cohort members' schools. The curriculum was logically sequenced to support the development of candidate competencies over the course of the program. The sequences of learning provide coherent experiences and a strong clinical practice aligned to school leaders' daily and monthly duties and responsibilities. The ASU Redesign Task Force in collaboration with the Leadership Academy (formerly the NYC Leadership Academy) determined the duties and responsibilities by creating a month-by-month chart of activities that principals engage in and administer. For example, school leaders are required to develop budgets and resource allocations for the coming school year between February and April of each year; therefore, the Organizational and Management course

is taught during that same period to provide just-in-time information and authentic coursework and clinical experiences for the candidates.

### **Performance Assessments**

Significant improvements were made to the course content, especially the key and critical assessments in the program. Key course assessments are nationally validated and meet the GaPSC Program Requirements. Critical assessments are designed in the same format as the key assessments for courses that may not have national validation. The key and critical assessment format is based on the Analyze, Design, Implement, and Evaluate (ADIE) model, which requires candidates to analyze, design, implement and evaluate experiential learning. Assessments are aligned to GELS and national standards such as the Performance Assessment for School Leaders, equity specialized certificate focused on Exploring and Deepening an Equity Mindset (BloomBoard micro-credential), GaPSC identified dispositions, and instructional change project. External experts in the field evaluate the PASL and equity specialized certificate.

### **Clinical Experience**

The ASU clinical experience made full use of the philosophy that the best way for an educator to learn how to be a principal is by doing the things that principals have to do under the watchful eyes of an experienced clinical director, onsite mentor, and leadership coach. Their plan was to use a large portion of the funds provided by The Wallace Foundation grant to relieve a number of promising leaders from teaching responsibilities to serve as apprentices/interns under highly effective principals in their respective districts. Although this plan did not come to fruition, they were able to design the clinical practices throughout the program to fulfill the 750 hours of clinical practice required by the GaPSC along with other state clinical experience requirements. This plan provided opportunity and flexibility for each candidate to address the skills and dispositions they needed most to develop or enhance as identified in each candidate's Individual Growth Plan.

The partner districts strongly emphasized the need for aspiring school leaders to be able to observe teachers and provide effective feedback. This was a non-negotiable from the districts, and the ASU Redesign Task Force kept this requirement front and center in the redesign. The purpose of this extensive performance-based clinical experience was to provide candidates with real life experiences as a school principal that also included collegial visits, advanced professional development, and problem-based seminars.

The ASU Educational Leadership Tier II Program includes sequences of learning and clinical experiences that culminate in a key assessment designed in the form of an Instructional Change Project. The Instructional Change Project must demonstrate the candidate's progression towards meeting the knowledge, skills, and dispositions identified throughout the Educational Leadership Tier II Program. Candidates must successfully prepare a final presentation, report of findings, and proposed recommendations to be shared with the school leader, LCST, and members of the school community.

ASU, in partnership with local schools and districts, requires Tier II candidates to solicit problems of practice that have been identified by the partners. The candidate uses actual school data and research as the basis for their Instructional Change Project. From this information, the

candidate will analyze the findings and develop an improvement plan for the partner school or district. ASU encourages schools and districts to participate as a way of providing 1) clinical experiences for the candidate in a real-life, real-time setting and 2) opportunities for the university to give back information and resources to their partner schools and districts that will be immediately relevant and timely.

### **Changes in Faculty and Staff**

Prior to the redesign of the Educational Leadership Tier II Program, all courses were taught by full-time university faculty, including some who were decades removed from the school building and classrooms or had never taught or been in a leadership role in K-12 schools. Presently, the Tier II program employs four part-time faculty and two full-time faculty. The part-time faculty are current practitioners representing school, district and state level leadership. This blend of practitioners and institutional faculty bring experience, up-to-date knowledge, and best practices to the curriculum that the ASU candidates need.

The program has added a full-time clinical director and an instructional leadership coach to provide additional candidate support. These new staff positions are critical to the program and candidate success. The expectations for the leadership coach and clinical director, as well as for the onsite mentors and faculty are explicitly outlined in the Leadership Candidate Support Team (LCST) Guide. The support of the clinical director and leadership coach has had a profound impact on candidate success. They are required to meet with the candidate and their onsite mentor at least two times a semester.

Furthermore, candidates are required to complete an instructional change project as a culminated assignment. Faculty support the analysis, design, implementation, and evaluation of the school improvement Instructional Change Project and coursework. The support staff (leadership coach, onsite mentor, and clinical director) ensure supervision and support for all components of the project and clinical experiences. The faculty and the Tier II staff support the candidates in the practice and development of leadership dispositions, the applications, synthesis of appropriate knowledge and skills learned throughout the program.

### **Implications**

Four themes emerge from ASU's experience restarting and rebuilding its principal preparation program. Each of these themes has implications for other IHE's facing similar circumstances. These themes are: circumstantial readiness, institutional management, and engaging key external stakeholders.

#### **Circumstantial Readiness**

*Rebuilding the program relied on an honest recognition of the state of the program, its relationship with key internal and external stakeholders, and the university itself.* Both the program and university were in flux. As part of the merger with Darton, the university was reassessing its programs and their fit within the newly merged institution. Additionally, a merger between administrations made it especially difficult to reform the struggling program, so

redesign from the ground-up was a much more bureaucratically feasible option. The redesign facilitator described the impact of the merger, “[ASU was] going through so many changes, combining Darton College and ASU was a big issue...which group of administrators did you listen to? Everybody was interim, and most of their administration wasn’t willing to take a big leap out and make any kind of bold changes. So, they all agreed...it was better to just shut the program down than try to make great improvements to get it back up and running.”

As was the case with other principal preparation programs nationally, local school districts—those who would hire graduates—did not hold ASU in high regard. This needed to be and was recognized as the critical factor: not only did ASU need districts to want to hire its graduates, but just as critically, districts in southwest Georgia needed to have confidence that they could reliably find new principal candidates from ASU. This was uniquely poignant in southwest Georgia where the principal pipeline is virtually non-existent outside of ASU’s program, and graduates’ local ties to the region make leadership roles in local districts the most appealing and feasible opportunities. A Redesign Task Force member described ASU’s goal as “really want[ing] to tailor a program that was going to meet the needs of southwest Georgia.” While another Redesign Task Force member shared that, from the district perspective, there was a certain level of de-facto reliance on ASU and, “in order to better serve the area, it was one of the programs that we could get to that was accessible for folks in that area. It was the only program that we had access to.” The mutually beneficial nature of the program’s success created a readiness for reform that contributed significantly to the redesign’s success.

## **Institutional Management**

*University-Wide Changes Created Both Challenges and Opportunities for Program Revitalization.* Most prominent among the accomplishments in navigating and managing ASU as a higher education institution were the changes to the recruitment and selection of students and successfully transitioning program faculty to a new curriculum. Historically, ASU focused on an open program that would enroll as many students who were academically qualified for the university as possible. With the redesign, the program shifted to recruiting and selecting students who not only appeared qualified for graduate work at the university but also appeared to be well-qualified upon graduation for positions as education leaders. That shift in mindset—from academically qualified to be a graduate student to professional potential to serve as a school principal—was one of the most profound shifts in the redesign process. Without losing sight of the responsibility to serve southwest Georgia, the redesign team seized the opportunity presented by the GaPSC and recruited candidates from outside Georgia.

Shifting student recruitment and selection was only half of the challenge and the opportunity within ASU. A program aligned to new nationally recognized features of effective principal preparation required not only additional faculty with direct knowledge and experience in school leadership but also faculty willing and able to teach revised curriculum, which presented institutional challenges. Tier II faculty were accustomed to teaching their research, interests, and syllabi, and a newly designed curriculum was a change to this “norm.” There was a required shift in faculty culture needed to accompany logistical, curricular, and other changes made. Tenured university faculty did not necessarily agree with the direction the program wanted to go and noted the dramatic change in rigor-level, which resulted in difficult conversations and discomfort

around what their role, if any, should be. A former Task Force member reflected, though, that, “I think sometimes if you want change, you have to make people feel uncomfortable...they were pushed to a point of growth.” In the interest of promoting growth, previous Tier II faculty found new roles in the (largely unchanged) Tier I program.

There was a university-level tension between designing a program that meets the standards, norms, and expectations of Albany State (and IHEs in general) versus one that truly serves and caters to the needs of the districts to whom it is responsible. One way in which these tensions came to light was in the push-back that came from the university expectation that full-time and often tenured faculty lead instruction when that is not necessarily the most impactful in a principal preparation program. The redesign wanted faculty who were experienced and immersed in the current challenges of leadership in schools, not instructors with outdated experience and war stories. A Redesign Task Force member shared, “The idea in the program was, let's go out. And let's find educators who are out there working doing the work, and let's hire them as adjunct faculty.” This shift required a change from institutional norms where the term *adjunct faculty* often is equated to lower quality because of lower cost. In this case, the idea was to flip that ASU expectation on its head and redefine the purpose of, qualifications for, and respect granted to adjunct faculty.

Amidst the turbulence of the university environment, there was relative stability within the redesign team. Although there was turnover in leadership, for most of the process, a single leader shepherded the process along through multiple changes in university leadership (both deans and provosts) as well as with partner districts.

### **Engaging Key External Stakeholders**

*Transformative changes to a program such as the changes at ASU would not have happened had the team not engaged key external stakeholders.* While it is easy to point to the importance of the financial resources provided by The Wallace Foundation, the Wallace Foundation was in some ways the least important external stakeholder. That is not to minimize both the importance of external funding and the reputational capital that goes along with a major philanthropic grant. The Wallace Foundation funding allowed for key staff and consultants to redesign the program. Merely having a grant from Wallace lent enormous credibility to the work and helped immeasurably with the rebranding. Nonetheless, the most important benefit from engaging with Wallace was undoubtedly access to expertise to inform the redesign.

Engaging local school districts to forge partnerships was not only a substantial change from past practice but improved the curriculum, faculty engagement, student recruitment, and placement of graduates. The redesign was recognized and informed by the mutually beneficial process. There were inherently shared interests between the University, the program, and the partner districts. Those shared interests capitalized on the shared interest in advancing southwest Georgia by building a program that met the needs of the districts, strengthened the regional leadership pipeline, and improved the knowledge and skills of students enrolled in the program.

### **Conclusion**

The focus of the ASU Project Director and the Tier II staff remains on continued improvement of the program and its sustainability. The program will seek continuous feedback from students, faculty, staff, and alumni as it continues to establish itself as a producer of high-quality school leaders. The Project Director has strategically used the grant period to establish a cadre of well-trained prospects and concentrate on replenishing the numbers as these initial prospects are placed in principal positions. This will undoubtedly be a smaller group and will require a smaller financial commitment than at start-up. Different apprenticeship/internship models can be explored, such as part-time rather than full-time, requiring less release time from the classroom, or a principal-for-a-day arrangement several times during the year, supplemented by specific principal duties at other times and intense involvement in the district's leadership institute. If, through the selection process, the program can determine which skills and dispositions need developing most, a specific plan can be created for each candidate and implemented in a systematic way. Sustainability in cash-strapped districts may require developing creative ways to get promising candidates significant "principal-type" practice time.

Institutions of higher education redesigning both teacher and administrator preparation programs in partnership with local districts is still a fairly new concept but one that is critical to the success of school leaders and, therefore, to student achievement. While other institutions of higher education will have their own unique circumstances, motivations, and resources, the goal of redesign remains the same: program improvement intended to produce school leaders who are highly prepared for the rigor and demands of their roles. Similarly, many obstacles faced by ASU will remain common across institutions of higher education; for example, institutional policies and bureaucratic hurdles will be likely challenges to any redesign program. Regardless of circumstance and obstacles, though, the key components for redesign highlighted by ASU (circumstantial readiness, institutional management, strategic branding, and engaging key external stakeholders) will be critical elements of an undertaking of similar purpose and magnitude by other institutions of higher education.

The larger significance of this redesign at ASU should not be undervalued. There is no debate about the importance of The Wallace Foundation's investment in ASU's principal preparation program. The UPPI grant was essential to the program redesign process. But the impact of foundation grants often lasts only until the grant is fully spent. In this case, with the generous support of The Wallace Foundation, ASU built a sustainable and scalable educational leadership program that stands as a model for redesigning higher education nationally.

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# The Effect of Charter School Management Companies on School Outcomes: A Closer Look at Michigan Charter Schools and Their Operators

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*Charter schools began as an experiment to improve public education in the United States of America (Weil, 2000). The theory was that these schools would operate outside of traditional public schools and would be free of the oversight and regulatory requirements constraining the current educational systems, in exchange for increased accountability and performance (Lake, 2013). These new educational programs would be incubators of innovation and spawn new educational methods, addressing the challenges plaguing traditional public schools (Price & Jankens, 2016). The purpose of this research was to explore charter school performance in Michigan by looking closer at charter school operators – charter school management companies. By isolating factors that are unique to each charter school, this research drew additional conclusions and gained further insight into influences that impact charter school performance. The results of this study provide insight into how charter schools perform, specifically when looking at the differences in management styles. The results also illuminate the differences between charter schools by for-profit and nonprofit status.*

**Keywords:** charter schools, management companies, CMO, EMO, ESP, educational service providers, operators, performance, accountability

Public education in the United States is a diverse marketplace of school designs and approaches (Weil, 2000). From conventional (or "traditional") public schools, to private religious and non-religious/parochial, to charter public schools (or public school academies), these various types of schools allow for choice and competition (The Education Trust – Midwest, 2016). As a strategy to disrupt conventional educational systems to introduce new ideas and innovations, charter schools exchanged freedom for accountability (Finn, Manno & Vanourek, 2000). Charter schools have more flexibility than their traditional counterparts, not being tied to the legacy systems of conventional public school districts, including unionization. One key difference is in their unique ability to contract for educational services. This flexibility allows charter schools to outsource their teaching staff and operate completely privatized educational programs through tax-funded school revenues. Hotly debated, even after almost 30 years, the ability for a charter school to operate as a private entity provides tremendous flexibility and autonomy from the traditional approach of public schooling in America.

The theory espoused by proponents of these quasi-public/private entities is that private organizations are more efficient and effective than government-run institutions (Buckley & Schneider, 2009). Though profit-driven, they are also focused on outcomes – a key ingredient to establishing and maintaining strong enrollment. Their disciplined approach, use of data-driven practices, and desire to innovate are all positive attributes that for-profit management companies tout. With over 3.4 million students attending charter schools, a key question facing educators and policymakers is "how are charter schools performing?"

### **Problem Statement**

Unlike conventional district schools, the charter school's organizational structure includes two additional partnerships: the authorizer and management company (Price & Jankens, 2016). Charter schools do not operate autonomously like that of conventional district schools. Instead, they are inextricably tied to their charter-granting organization, and typically contract for educational services from a management company, or Charter Management Organization (CMO). CMOs, which can be not-for-profit or for profit, are private organizations that service charter schools. There are many designs – from providing only business services, such as bookkeeping, accounting, and payroll – to full service (or turn-key) companies; they own the land, building(s), furniture, all educational materials, including curriculum, textbooks and supplies, employ all the faculty and staff, and carry out all school operations. Although there are some studies that look at large national networks like KIPP and Green Dot charter schools, research that isolates CMOs and looks at performance across the spectrum is unavailable (Jankens & Weiss, 2017).

Therefore, the full outcomes of a charter school are not their own. They are influenced by their authorizer through various means, including the charter contract, educational goals, and authorizer expectations. Additionally, the CMO that services the school has at the very least, direct involvement into the performance of the charter program, if not being completely responsible for it (as with a full-service CMO). Consequently, additional research is needed to provide a clearer understanding of how CMO performance relates to charter school performance (Betts & Hill, 2006; Ertas & Roch, 2014). Much of the current research uses a direct comparison methodology, evaluating charter school performance to that of conventional public schools

Clark, Gleason, Tuttle & Silverberg, 2011). This approach does not take into consideration the complexities and uniqueness of the charter school operational structures (Davis, 2013; Duffy, 2014). Although there are some studies that look at large national networks like KIPP and Green Dot charter schools individually, research that isolates EPSs and looks at performance across the spectrum is unavailable. Seldom is charter school performance associated directly with Educational Service Providers (CMO) (Roch, 2015).

Therefore, the connection of a charter school to its CMO is a critical element in the school's performance. Yet, there is limited research studying the particular aspects of how schools perform based on their CMO, including size and type. The variations in organizational structure of these unique of these schools is worth further exploring to truly understand charter schools and identify the elements that influence their performance.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this research is to examine the effects of charter management companies (CMOs) on charter school performance. Using Michigan charter schools as the unit of analysis, this research examined charter school performance by CMO type. By looking specifically at management companies and their design (e.g., size, for profit status), new conclusions were made about performance patterns and how charter schools are doing across various service providers. Addressing the inconclusive results of most current research (Davis et al., 2013; Lake, 2013), this study focused on the unique aspects of charter school CMOs when looking at whether these schools are performing.

This research focused on various aspects of school performance, including achievement, student growth, graduation rates, and overall school performance through Michigan's school accountability system. This focus provides a broader approach on the activities surrounding charter school operations that is lacking in the literature.

### **Literature Review**

During the 2019-20 school year, charter schools in the United States enrolled 7.2% of all public school students, serving more than 3.4 million students in the roughly 7,700 schools in operation (NCES, 2021). Charter schools in Michigan enrolled approximately 10% of the state's student population. During the 2019-2020 academic year, there were roughly 360 charter schools in Michigan located in both the lower and upper peninsulas. The three Michigan counties that comprise Detroit, which include Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb, account for approximately 60% of the state's charter school students. Even more, almost half or 47% of all public school students in the City of Detroit are enrolled in a charter school (MDE 2022).

### **Charter Management Organizations**

One of the unique factors of charter schools is the ability to contract for academic services (Price & Jankens, 2016). This form of "outsourcing" of teachers and administrators is a key element that allows charter schools to establish large multi-state networks. Although there is controversy around private organizations providing academic services to public schools, the ability for charter

school boards to select their particular operator allows for increased competition, ultimately improving student outcomes (Price & Jankens, 2016).

These charter management organizations or Educational Service Providers (ESP) as they are also called, are not-for-profit and for-profit organizations that provide contracted services to charter schools (Roch & Sai, 2015). There are many designs and approaches to these management companies, from providing business only services to being the entire charter school (e.g., curriculum, instruction, building and facilities, etc.). Per Michigan law, a charter school board may contract for services through a management agreement to provide comprehensive educational, administrative, management, or instructional services or staff (MCL 380.503c)

The schools in this study were services by 58 different CMOs: 216 schools managed by for-profit CMOs, 20 schools managed by not-for-profit CMOs, with 59 schools were declared self-managed.

### ***Management Company Services***

Boards may take a variety of approaches in the way they outsource services for their charter school. From purely contracting for business and financial services, to full, turn-key operations, the extent to which the management company is involved is determined by the specific model utilized (Roch & Sai, 2015). Some charter school boards opt to contract for limited services to retain control or ownership over the educational program. Sometimes referred to as "a la carte" management services, these arrangements are responsible for student learning squarely with the school's board. These management companies are not a party to the educational program; therefore, it is unclear whether they are accountable for the academic outcomes (Barnum, 2018; Stahl, 2020). Most charter school boards, however, elect to contract for additional services that, to a varying extent, implement the school's educational program. This may include limited academic services, hiring, training, and evaluating teachers and administrators while leaving curriculum decisions to the board, but may go as far as implementing the entire school model (Roch & Sai, 2015).

In the full-service operational approach, the boards give much of their involvement in the school's operations to the management company. Although they are still legally obligated to oversee the implementation of the charter contract, and the educational program, and retain all fiduciary responsibility, the management company controls all aspects of the school's operations (Benton, 2021). The board hires the management company in these relationships to fully implement its proprietary model. The board is then responsible for overseeing and evaluating the management company's performance, then adjusting or terminating the contract for poor performance (Roch & Sai, (2018). Though many network providers offer high levels of support and academic services, there is a wide variety of approaches that management companies take in providing services.

## **Conceptual Framework**

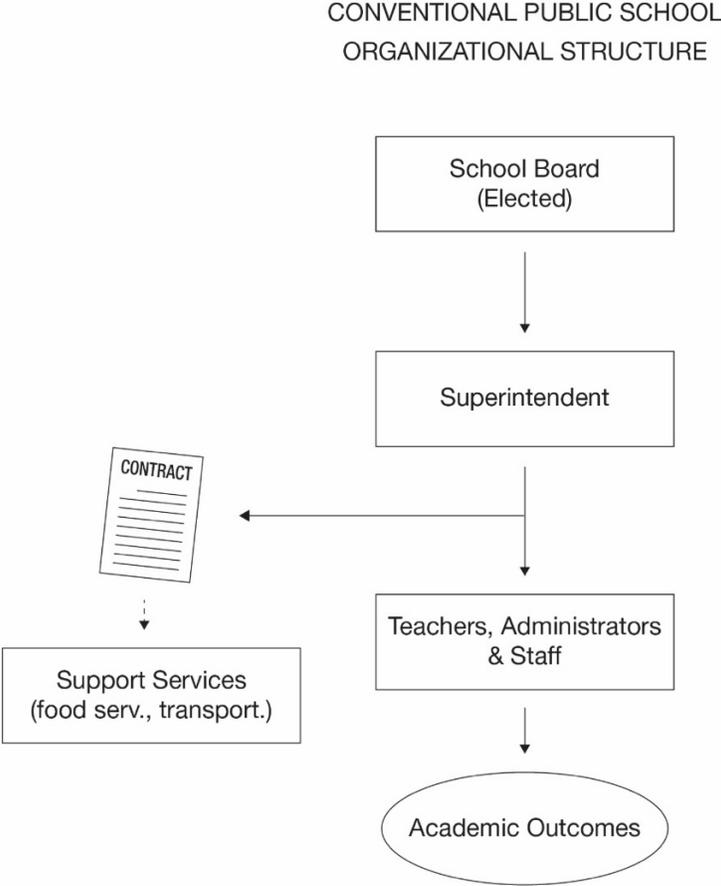
Because the charter school model has two additional elements that conventional districts don't have – the authorizer and management company – their organizational structure is unique to conventional public schools. Rather than all the accountability placed on the shoulders of the

school and district administrators and board members of a conventional district, charter school accountability extends to charter school management companies and authorizers.

The field of charter schools is still working this out in practice, as most of the accountability is still shouldered by the school itself (the board, students, and families). However, the outcomes of these programs are linked to the activities surrounding the authorizers and the school's management (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010). Although management companies are technically separate organizations, they are contractually responsible for the operation and academic outcomes of the schools they serve (McShane, 2021).

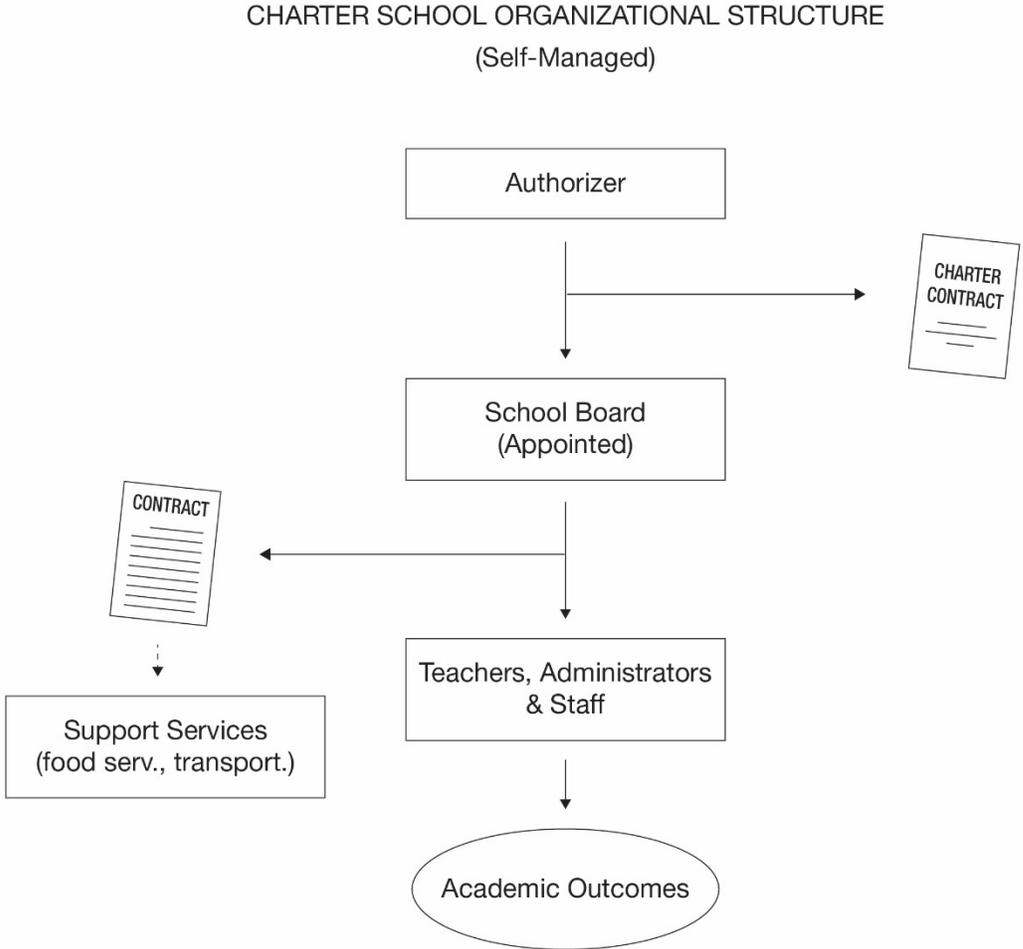
Figure 1 illustrates the conventional public school district's organizational structure within the United States. Although this model varies from state to state, it generally indicates the most common structures used. In conventional schools, the academic outcomes are directly connected to the school board, through the teachers, administrators, and school staff. Although they may not contract for educational services, conventional school boards may elect to contract for non-academic services, such as food service, transportation, and janitorial support.

**Figure 1**  
*Charter School Organizational Structure without a CMO (Self-managed)*



The authorizer of the charter school organizational structure adds an additional layer of oversight (Figure 2). Using a similar structure to that of conventional public schools, where the board is directly responsible for the outcomes of the academic program, self-managed charter schools retain traditional lines of authority. Self-managed charter schools may contract for non-academic services, such as food service, transportation, and business services (e.g., accounting, HR).

**Figure 2**  
*Charter School Organizational Structure without a CMO (Self-managed)*



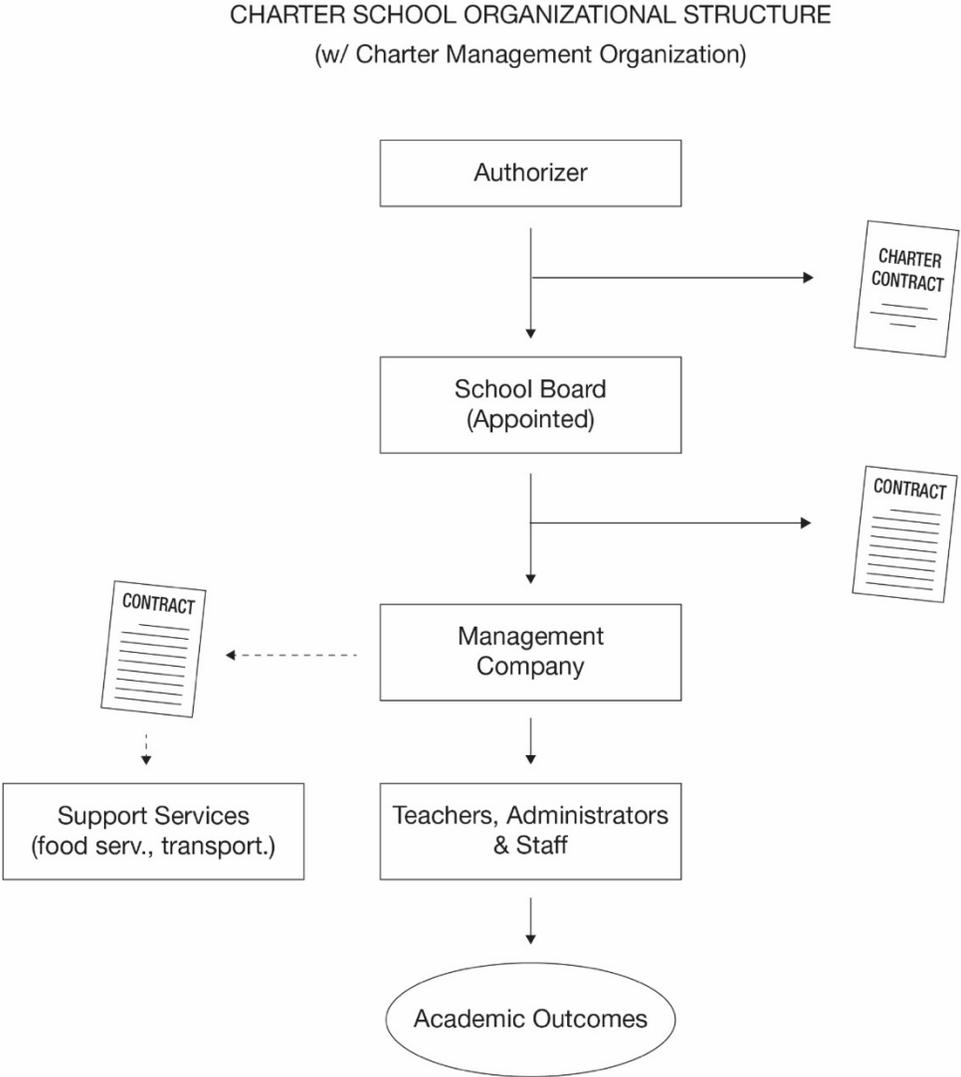
It should be noted that self-managed charter schools may contract with an outside organization to handle personnel activities, including human resources, payroll, and oversight, but no. Sometimes referred to as a la carte services, these business services, or "back office" services, are to simplify the administration of the charter school program. Although technically still management companies, these organizations do not provide academic services or oversee the educational program (e.g., curriculum, instructional activities, assessment, etc.). Therefore,

charter schools that elect to contract only for business services are not classified as having a CMO, and thus labeled self-managed.

In contrast, Figure 3 illustrates the charter school's operational structure that includes an educational service provider/CMO. Rather than the board being directly connected to the outcomes of the educational program, charter school boards transfer some of the responsibility, through the contract, to the management company. Therefore, the CMO is responsible for the academic outcomes of the program, at least in part.

Ultimately, management companies are integral in the performance of each charter school they operate. Many times, they *are* the school (e.g., full-service CMO). Therefore, evaluating charter school performance is directly evaluating management company performance.

**Figure 3**  
*Charter School Organizational Structure with a CMO*



## Research Questions

This research examined charter school performance in Michigan by CMO type. CMO type includes self-managed (no CMO), nonprofit, and for-profit organizations. By isolating the variables associated with a CMO, new conclusions can be drawn about patterns of performance and how charter schools are doing across various service providers. To fully explore the variables around the topic of charter school performance in relation to their CMOs, the following questions will be used to guide this research project:

RQ1: What effect does CMO type have on student and school performance?

Sub-questions:

1. Is there a statistically significant difference between CMO type and student achievement, as measured by the Proficiency Index?
2. Is there a statistically significant difference between CMO type and student growth in English Language Arts?
3. Is there a statistically significant difference between CMO type and student growth in Math?
4. Is there a statistically significant difference between CMO type and graduation rate?
5. Is there a statistically significant difference between CMO type and the Overall (Composite) Index?

RQ2: What are the top performing charter schools in Michigan, by CMO Type?

Sub-questions:

1. What are the top performing charter management companies in Michigan, by individual schools?
2. What are the top performing charter management companies in Michigan, overall?
3. What percent of Michigan charter management companies perform above the state average in overall school performance (Composite Index)?

The following null hypotheses were used to further test Research Question 1:

Hypotheses (Null):

H<sub>1</sub> There is no statistically significant difference between CMO type and student achievement, as measured by the Proficiency Index.

H<sub>2</sub>: There is no statistically significant difference between CMO type and student growth in English Language Arts.

H<sub>3</sub>: There is no statistically significant difference between CMO type and student growth in Math.

H<sub>5</sub>: There is no statistically significant difference between CMO type and graduation rate.

H<sub>6</sub>: There is no statistically significant difference between CMO type and the Overall (Composite) Index.

## Research Approach

The performance of a charter school is inextricably tied to the performance of the management company that services that program. This study used a quantitative, non-experimental research design to examine the variables associated with charter school performance by CMO type. These variables included student performance outcomes (achievement and growth), comparison data (state and district), and demographics (e.g., special education population, free and reduced-price school lunch eligibility, English Language Learner eligibility (ELL), ethnicity, and operational data (e.g., instructional, administrative, and operational expenditures, and fund balance).

Data was collected from the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) public database [www.mischooldata.org](http://www.mischooldata.org). Descriptive statistics were used to provide an overview of the schools and management companies, with specific inferential statistics used to test stated research questions and hypotheses. Specifically, a test of variance, ANOVA, was used to analyze the variables in Research Questions 1 and 2, and the associated null hypotheses.

## Methodology

### Population and Sample

There were 279 charter school organizations (classified as a district), with a total of 365 individual school sites in operation in Michigan for the 2018-2019 academic year (pre-COVID). A total of 314 schools met the criteria for a general education charter school, with 295 of those offering grades 3, 8, or 11, having posted scores, and being in operation for at least two years.

- 58 Management Companies Represented
- 15 Cyber Schools
- 206 Elementary (K-8)
- 59 Elementary and high school (some configuration of both primary and secondary)
- 30 High schools only

**Table 1**

*Sample by CMO Type*

CMO Type	# of Schools	# of Schools	Enrollment	% of Enroll.
For Profit	216	72%	60,866	83%
Nonprofit	20	7%	2,820	4%
Self-Managed*	60	20%	11,772	13%
Total	295	100%	75,458	100%

*\*Self-managed schools may include programs that contract for business services.*

**Table 2**

*Sample by CMO Size*

CMO Size	# of Schools	Ave. Enrollment	Total Enrollment
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1 School	26	279	7,696
2-5 Schools	62	225	13,951
More than 5 Schools	145	290	42,039
Self-Managed*	60	200	11,772
Total	295	257	75,458

\*Self-managed schools may include programs that contract for business services.

The strict discipline academies (SDAs) were removed for this study due to their unique format. Although cyber schools are a unique format to that of brick-and-mortar charter schools, they were included in this study as they follow the same schooling requirements and assessment administration, and thus the data is comparable.

### Variables

The independent variable used for Research Question 1 was CMO type, which included For-Profit (FP), Nonprofit (NP), and Self-Managed (SM) school programs. The Self-Managed variable had data for schools that only contracted for services solely for business and HR functions. The dependent variables for Research Question 1 included the Proficiency Index, ELA Growth scores, Math Growth scores, Graduation Index, and the overall School Quality Index.

**Table 3**

*Breakdown of Variables*

Variable	Ind or Dep	Variable Type
CMO Type (FP, NP, SM)	Independent	Categorical
Proficiency Index	Dependent	Continuous
ELA Growth	Dependent	Continuous
Math Growth	Dependent	Continuous
Graduation Index	Dependent	Continuous
School Quality Index	Dependent	Continuous

### Limitations and Delimitations

This study was limited to publicly available data collected by the state departments. Aggregate performance scores were used (not student level), so this analysis did not consider the school size as a factor. This study was limited to schools designated as General Education by the Michigan Department of Education that served kindergarten through twelfth-grade grades. Schools designated as Alternative Education, Special Education, and Vocational/CTE programs were removed.

### Analysis and Results

Before analysis, data were organized and coded following the parameters outlined in the variables section. Care was taken to address the normalization of the data, including the review of skewness and kurtosis and removing outliers. Once the data was prepared for analysis, descriptive statistics were calculated. The results of the descriptive statistics are presented below.

**Table 4**  
*Descriptive Statistics*

	<b>n</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>
<b>Proficiency Index</b>					
For-Profit (FP)	216	47.4	24.7	3.2	100
Nonprofit (NP)	20	49.5	29.7	7.0	91.4
Self-Managed (SM)	59	40.2	29.4	3.9	100
<b>ELA Growth Index</b>					
For-Profit (FP)	213	55.3	23.3	4.8	100
Nonprofit (NP)	19	58.7	29.0	11.3	94.9
Self-Managed (SM)	59	46.9	27.8	4.3	100
<b>Math Growth Index</b>					
For-Profit (FP)	213	42.7	27.8	0	100
Nonprofit (NP)	19	43.5	22.7	6.4	87.5
Self-Managed (SM)	59	34.4	28.8	0	100
<b>Graduation Index</b>					
For-Profit (FP)	56	88.7	14.3	36.2	100
Nonprofit (NP)	5	68.9	35.2	13.0	68.8
Self-Managed (SM)	15	74.0	24.9	27.0	100
<b>School Quality Index</b>					
For-Profit (FP)	216	55.5	20.5	19.3	99.43
Nonprofit (NP)	20	55.5	20.5	19.0	83.57
Self-Managed (SM)	60	47.7	24.2	13.0	99.31

### **Research Question 1**

Research Question 1 was investigated through five subsequent hypotheses, with each focusing on the difference between authorizer type and a specific student or school performance measure. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed on each null hypothesis to determine what variance exists between the independent variable CMO type (FP, NP & SM), and student performance, serving as the dependent variable. The results of the analysis for each hypothesis are below.

Research Question 1, Ho1, investigated the difference between CMO type and student achievement, as measured by the Michigan Proficiency Index. An ANOVA analysis was conducted. No statistically significant difference between the means of the three CMO types was found (Alpha = 0.05) when comparing student proficiency results to CMO type. Therefore, the null hypothesis was accepted. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 5.

**Table 5**  
*ANOVA Results: Proficiency Index*

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between Groups	2647.537	2	1323.768	1.95501	0.143412	3.026678
Within Groups	197717.8	292	677.1158			
Total	200365.3	294				

Research Question 1, Ho2, investigated the difference between CMO type and student growth in English Language Arts, as measured by the Michigan ELA Growth Index. An ANOVA analysis was conducted and the results show a statistically significant difference between the means of the three authorizer types,  $F(2,288)=3.06$ ,  $p=0.05$  ( $r=.02$ ). Student's ELA growth was highest for schools managed by Not-for-Profit CMOs ( $M = 58.66$ ,  $SD = 29.00$ ), followed by For-Profit CMOs ( $M = 55.32$ ,  $SD = 23.30$ ), with schools being Self-Managed having the lowest student ELA growth ( $M = 46.95$ ,  $SD = 27.77$ ). Subsequently, the null hypothesis was rejected. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 6.

**Table 6**  
*ANOVA Results: ELA Growth*

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between Groups	3713.258	2	1856.629	3.055454	0.048631	3.027111
Within Groups	175001.5	288	607.6442			
Total	178714.8	290				

Research Question 1, Ho3, investigated the difference between CMO type and student growth in mathematics, as measured by the Michigan Math Growth Index. An ANOVA analysis was conducted, but no statistically significant difference between the means of the three CMO types was found (Alpha = 0.05). Therefore, the null hypothesis was accepted. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 7.

**Table 7**  
*ANOVA Results: Math Growth*

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
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Between Groups	3340.323	2	1670.162	2.178851	0.115034	3.027111
Within Groups	220761.5	288	766.5331			
Total	224101.9	290				

Research Question 1, Ho4, investigated the overall differences in school graduation rates between CMO type, as measured by the Michigan Graduation Index. An ANOVA analysis was conducted, and the results showed a statistically significant difference between the means of the three authorizer types,  $F(2,73)=5.65$ ,  $p=0.01$  ( $r=.13$ ). Schools managed by For-Profit CMOs had the highest graduation rates ( $M = 88.72$ ,  $SD = 14.25$ ), followed by schools that were Self-Managed ( $M = 74.08$ ,  $SD = 24.89$ ), with schools managed by Nonprofit CMOs having the lowest graduation rate ( $M = 68.92$ ,  $SD = 35.21$ ). Consequently, the null hypothesis was rejected. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 8.

**Table 8**  
*ANOVA Results: Graduation Rate*

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between Groups	3842.303	2	1921.151	5.653396	0.005216	3.122103
Within Groups	24807.04	73	339.8225			
Total	28649.35	75				

Research Question 1, Ho5, investigated the overall composite index scores between CMO types, as measured by the overall School Quality Index. An ANOVA analysis was conducted and with the results show a statistically significant difference between the means of the three authorizer types,  $F(2,292)=3.20$ ,  $p=0.04$  ( $r=.02$ ). The Composite Index was highest for schools with For-Profit CMOs ( $M = 55.55$ ,  $SD = 20.52$ ) and Nonprofit CMOs ( $M = 55.53$ ,  $SD = 20.48$ ), with Self-Managed schools having a considerably lower Composite Index ( $M = 47.71$ ,  $SD = 24.24$ ). This null hypothesis was also rejected. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 9.

**Table 9**  
*ANOVA Results: School Quality Index*

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between Groups	2901.153	2	1450.577	3.195821	0.042369	3.026678
Within Groups	132538.2	292	453.898			
Total	135439.4	294				

## Research Question 2

Research Question 2, sub-question 1 investigated individual schools' top-performing charter management companies in Michigan. To explore this research question, a review of existing data and a descriptive statistical analysis were performed. When looking at the top-performing charter management company, the Index areas of Proficiency, Growth, and Graduation were ranked to produce the top schools in each category. Table 10 displays the top three performers in each area.

**Table 10**

*Performance of Michigan Charter Schools: Rank Order by Associated Index*

School Name	Management Company	CMO Type	Index
<b>Proficiency</b>			
Washtenaw Technical Middle College	Corner Stone Charter Schools	For-Profit	100
Honey Creek Community School	N/A	Self-Managed	100
Kingsbury Country Day School	N/A	Self-Managed	100
<b>Growth Index</b>			
Washtenaw Technical Middle College	Corner Stone Charter Schools	For-Profit	100
Honey Creek Community School	N/A	Self-Managed	100
Kingsbury Country Day School	N/A	Self-Managed	100
<b>Graduation Index</b>			
Charyl Stockwell Academy - HS	CS Partners	For-Profit	100
Central Academy	Global Education Excellence	For-Profit	100
Detroit Edison PS Academy - HS	National Heritage Academies	For-Profit	100

Research Question 2, sub-question 2 investigated the top-performing charter management companies in Michigan. To explore this research question, a review of existing data and a descriptive statistical analysis was performed. The schools were ranked by the overall School Quality Index in determining the overall highest performing charter management companies. A list of the top 25 schools and their CMO was provided (Table 11). Of the top 25, 16 schools were managed by For-Profit CMOs. One by a Nonprofit CMO, and eight were Self-Managed.

**Table 11***Performance of Michigan Charter Schools: Rank Order by School Quality Index*

<b>BuildingName</b>	<b>Management Company</b>	<b>CMO Type</b>	<b>Quality Index</b>
Washtenaw Technical Middle College	Corner Stone Charter Schools	For-Profit	100
Blue Water Middle College Academy	N/A	Self-Managed	100
Uplift Michigan Academy	N/A	Self-Managed	98.21
Excel Charter Academy	National Heritage Academies	For-Profit	97.83
South Arbor Charter Academy	National Heritage Academies	For-Profit	96.91
Chatfield School	Chatfield Management	For-Profit	96.7
Grand Rapids Child Discovery Center	N/A	Self-Managed	96.14
Honey Creek Community School	N/A	Self-Managed	96.11
South Canton Scholars Charter Academy	National Heritage Academies	For-Profit	96.09
Ann Arbor Learning Community	Charter HR Educational	For-Profit	95.97
Vanguard Charter Academy	National Heritage Academies	For-Profit	95.94
Renaissance Public School	CS Partners	For-Profit	95.92
Cross Creek Charter Academy	National Heritage Academies	For-Profit	95.86
Canton Charter Academy	National Heritage Academies	For-Profit	95.86
Achieve Charter Academy	National Heritage Academies	For-Profit	95.85
Ojibwe Charter School	MEP Services	For-Profit	95.43
Kingsbury Country Day School	N/A	Self-Managed	95.02
Will Carleton Charter School Academy	N/A	Self-Managed	94.9
Plymouth Scholars Charter	National Heritage Academies	For-Profit	94.66
Old Mission Peninsula School	Black Pearl Educational	Non-Profit	94.42
Da Vinci Institute (K-8)	N/A	Self-Managed	93.99
Canton Preparatory High School	Prepnet	For-Profit	93.55
Noor International Academy	Hamadeh Educational	For-Profit	93.48
Walker Charter Academy	National Heritage Academies	For-Profit	93.37
Livingston Classical Academy	N/A	Self-Managed	93.05

And finally, Research Question 2, sub-question 3 investigated the percentage of Michigan charter management company types and their performance to the state average. To explore this research question, a review of existing data and a descriptive statistical analysis was performed.

The average charter school performance, by CMO, ranged across the various performance indexes. Although the nonprofit CMO operated schools performed the highest in both proficiency and growth, the for-profit CMO operated schools had the highest performance in overall school quality (Table 12). The for-profit managed schools even performed higher than the state average in graduation – significantly higher than all other management types. Self-managed schools performed the lowest in all performance areas, and lower than the state average in all categories.

**Table 12**  
*Average Performance by CMO with the State Average*

	<b>Proficiency Index</b>	<b>Growth Index</b>	<b>Graduation Index</b>	<b>Quality Index</b>
For-Profit	46.1	47.3	81.2	71.7
Non-Profit	37.9	39.1	75.1	67.2
Self-Managed	40.2	40.7	74.1	67.9
State-Wide Average	60.6	59.4	74.6	75.3

The average performance of all CMO types, however, was lower than the state average in the areas of Proficiency, Growth, and overall School Quality Indexes. Only Graduation Index was higher for For-Profit schools, the highest of all charter models and the state average (Table 12). 29.8% of charter schools are above the state average on Proficiency Index. 30.2% of charter schools are above the state average in Growth Index. 78.9% of charter schools are above the state average in Graduation Index, and 47.1% of charter schools are above the state average in the overall School Quality Index (Table 13).

**Table 13**  
*Percent of Charter Schools Above State Average*

	<b>Proficiency Index</b>	<b>Growth Index</b>	<b>Graduation Index</b>	<b>School Quality</b>
For-Profit	29.6%	31.0%	85.7%	50.5%
Non-Profit	40.0%	35.0%	60.0%	40.0%
Self-Managed	28.8%	27.1%	60.0%	37.2%
Total Charters	29.8%	30.2%	78.9%	47.1%

### **Conclusion**

This research concludes that there is a statistically significant difference in CMO type and charter school performance in Michigan, and charter school performance varies by CMO type. Specifically, For-Profit CMOs consistently performed among the best among all operator types when analyzing Research Question 1. When looking specifically at the three statistically significant outcomes, For-Profit CMO performance was higher than both Nonprofit and Self-

Managed schools in the area of Graduation. However, Nonprofit CMO performance was higher than For-Profit and Self-Managed Schools in Language Arts Growth. For the Composite Index, both For-Profit and Nonprofit CMO types were statistically similar but also higher than Self-Managed Programs.

Additionally, for-profit CMOs outperform other types of operational approaches but not the state average. When looking at Research Question 2, using descriptive statistics, For Profit CMO types topped other CMO types with the highest performance averages of all CMO types. Again, though, they did not outperform the State Average, except for the Graduation Index. When looking at the total number of schools higher than the state average, For-Profit CMO-operated schools outperformed the other two types in Graduation and Overall School Quality. Nonprofits, however, outperformed both For-Profits and Self-Managed Schools in Proficiency and Growth.

### **Implications**

The results are mixed when looking at the performance of charter schools by management company type. Although For-Profit managed schools appeared to do better overall than Nonprofit and Self-Managed schools, the amounts were not all significant and not by much. It is also interesting to see the variation in performance across the categories of performance Indexes. For example, if we only look at the overall School Quality Index, For-Profit CMO-operated schools were highest among all school types, including the state average.

The components that make up the School Quality Index are more than just academic results. This suggests that For-Profit charter management companies are holistically higher performing than other school types, which may be higher in one area of academic performance (e.g., ELA or Math).

The Michigan overall School Quality Index value is based on student growth, proficiency, graduation rates, English learner progress, attendance rates, advanced coursework completion, postsecondary enrollment, and staffing ratios. With their higher graduation rate, in addition to what is typically a more structured organizational model, For-Profit management companies are larger and more refined than their Nonprofit or Self-managed counterparts. Surprisingly, however, these schools perform, on average, higher than their conventional public school district counterparts. Though opponents of for-profit charter schools argue that these programs are only in it for profit, the results of this study suggest there is more to the story.

### **Recommendations for Policy**

Consider charter management type and organization when reviewing charter school performance and looking at variables that impact school performance. Lumping all charter schools into the same category ignores the nuances that distinguish the uniqueness of these programs. Additional focus should be placed on the quality of CMO operation practices due to their profit status. The policies, practices, and staff of CMOs should be reviewed, as well as certification and credentials.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Sharing of knowledge across management companies would help other types of school types (what can we learn from For-Profit management companies). However, this may be difficult because of the nature of the For-Profit design (competition). Charter management companies should engage with professional organizations that hold quality discussions and offer insight into quality operating practices. In addition, NACSA and state charter school organizations can be resources to assist management company staff in improving their operational activities, which may improve their school's performance.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

In addition to replicating this study in other states nationally to see if similar results bear out, a deeper, more targeted investigation around operational practices and policies impacting charter schools would be beneficial. For example, other variables and demographic factors, such as race, geographic location, and SES, would inform the nuances among CMO practices and the uniqueness of the schools they charter. And a broader investigation into closed charter schools and the relationship to CMO practices may illuminate the behaviors of staff and the decision-making process.

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