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The International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation is a nationally refereed journal published annually in the Spring by the International Council of Professors of Educational Leadership.

## **Note from ICPEL Publications Director, Brad Bizzell**

The International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation is ICPEL's contribution to the Open Education Resources (OER) movement. This contribution to OER will be permanent.

In August, 2005, NCPEA<sup>1</sup> partnered with Rice University and the Connexions Project, to publish our IJELP as open and free to all who had access to the Internet. The purpose of the NCPEA/Knowledge Base Connexions Project was to "add to the knowledge base of the educational administration profession" and "aid in the improvement of administrative theory and practice, as well as administrative preparation programs." Our partnership continues but a new door opened for NCPEA Publications to join the OER movement in a more substantive and direct way. In March 2013, NCPEA Publications and the NCPEA Executive Board committed the IJELP to the OER movement.

### **What are Open Educational Resources (OER)?**

Open Educational Resources (OER) are teaching and learning materials that you may freely use, adapt and reuse, without charge. Open Educational Resources are different from other resources an educator may use in that OER have been given limited licensing rights. That means they have been authored or created by an individual or organization that chooses to provide access to all, at no charge. ICPEL Publications is committed to providing access to all, while assuring author/s of full attribution as others use the material.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2018 the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration changed its name to the International Council of Professors of Educational Leadership

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ICPEL open educational resources are not an open door at the ICPEL Publications submission and review stages. We have always insisted on and will continue to require very thorough peer reviews (double-blind). ICPEL Publications is fortunate to have a cadre of professional reviewers (university professors), numbering over 200. Editors first consider a submitted manuscript, and if appropriate, selects/assigns two reviewers who also have the expertise/interest in the manuscript's specific topic. This process assures that reviewers will read an author's manuscript with expertise/experience in that area.

The "openness" of the IJELP OER comes at publication stage. Once the issues are published, they are formatted/published in an open access website, indexed by Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), catalogued as a "commendable journal" in the Cabell's Directory, and provided to the Open Educational Resource database. The IJELP is currently viewed and read by educators from over 72 countries and all 50 U.S. States.

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*The manuscripts in Volume 17, Number 1 (Spring 2022) have been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the International Council of Professors of Educational Leadership as significant contributions to the scholarship and practice of school administration and PK-12 education.*

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# Repairing the Principal Pipeline: Does Hiring Type Slow the Leak?

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the International Council of Professors of Educational Leadership (ICPEL) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



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*School principals' have a significant impact on student achievement and positive educational outcomes (Beteille et al., 2012; Branch et al., 2013; Miller, 2009; Miller, 2013; Supovitz et al., 2010). There are concerns regarding the high turnover rate and shortage of applicants for school leadership positions currently within the United States (Beteille et al., 2012; Burkhauser et al., 2012; Burkhauser, 2015; Jensen, 2014; Whitaker, 2003). According to research, this current state of affairs significantly impacts high poverty schools (Beteille et al., 2012; Miller, 2013). This quantitative research study aimed to contribute to the body of literature regarding principal retention and investigate whether there is a significant relationship between hiring type (i.e., internal or external promotion) and principal retention in the state of Georgia when controlling for potential covariates. Using information obtained through the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) and the Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA), 132 principals were included in the study cohort involving panel data from 2015-2019. Using a conceptual framework based on human resource theories and the internal promotion cycle, a random-effects logistic regression examined the relationship between hiring type and principal turnover. Principal race and CCRPI scores emerged as statistically significant variables in relationship to principal turnover. Although hiring type was not statistically significant, the practical significance of internal promotion in combination with other factors is supported. Insight is provided into identifying leadership candidates, the hiring process, and increasing principal retention rates despite the demands of the job. This knowledge could significantly impact school districts' hiring practices and the development of leadership programs in the educational community.*

**Keywords:** principal turnover, principal retention, hiring type

While there is a demand for school principals who can lead and transform educational organizations (Beteille et al., 2012; Burkhauser et al., 2012; Burkhauser, 2015; Jensen, 2014; Whitaker, 2003), school districts across the United States are facing challenges recruiting, hiring, and retaining school principals (Educational Research Services, 2000; Pounder & Merrill, 2001; Fuller & Young, 2009). To make matters more complicated, principal leadership has progressed from decade to decade, eventually leading to the current climate of increased accountability, raising the stakes higher than ever before (Alvoid & Black, 2014; Goodwin et al., 2005). Despite these changes, one thing has remained consistent, “Leadership is vital to the effectiveness of a school” (Marzano et al., 2005, p.4). Previous researchers have noted that increased job complexity and stress will further accelerate retirement and attrition of the current principal workforce (Beteille et al., 2012; Miller, 2013).

High rates of leadership turnover in districts across the United States range from 15% to 30% each year; researchers highlight exceptionally high rates of turnover occur in schools serving low-income, minority, and low-achieving students (Branch et al., 2008; Fuller & Young, 2009; Loeb et al., 2010). During 2016-2017 the national average for principal tenure was four years, with a turnover rate of 21% in high-poverty schools (Levin & Bradley, 2019). Shockingly, a recent national study of public school principals found that approximately 18% of principals were no longer in the same position one year later (Levin & Bradley, 2019).

According to the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education (2019), one of the top ten issues to watch in 2020 was the issue concerning principal leadership. The principal’s responsibility for creating conditions leading to the recruitment and retention of effective teachers to ensure successful classrooms (Levin & Bradley, 2019) makes principal retention paramount to the future of Georgia schools. On average, the annual principal turnover rate in Georgia is 19% (Georgia Department of Education, 2015) which is cause for concern considering school leaders are responsible for all aspects of student learning, both inside and outside the classroom.

Findings from educational leadership literature highlight concerns regarding 1) the shortage of qualified school leadership candidates, 2) the adverse effects of principal turnover, and 3) the desire of principals to achieve and improve education while working in schools with higher achieving, more socioeconomic advantaged students (Beteille et al., 2012; Pounder & Merrill, 2001). More pointedly, in 2012, Beteille et al. reported “more than one out of every five principals leave their school each year” to move to more desirable positions, often at the detriment of schools with high-poverty and low-achieving students (p. 904). These studies suggest that the desire to achieve and improve education, which attracts candidates to the principalship, may also influence them to move to schools with a better chance of achievement.

To underscore the principal’s impact on positive school outcomes, research demonstrates the importance of quality principal leadership and how it directly influences teacher retention and increases student achievement (Beteille et al., 2012; Branch et al., 2013; Miller, 2009). Research firmly supports this relationship between principal longevity, retention of effective principals, and positive school outcomes (Miller, 2013; Papa, 2007), establishing the relevance of principal retention and the essential need to explore the influences of principal recruitment and hiring practice. While both internal and external candidate recruitment methods have garnered support from researchers (Carlson, 1961; Groyberg et al., 2008; Hargreaves et al., 2003; Pounder & Merrill, 2001; Rao & Drazin, 2002), limited studies relate hiring type (i.e., internal or external promotion) to principal retention.

Given the imperative need for capable leadership in school improvement, the looming shortage of candidates, and the increasing demands on administrators, the task of principal selection is daunting. The process of selecting and hiring capable principal candidates could be one of the most critical tasks district administrators and school boards face during their tenure. Unfortunately, other factors (i.e., time constraints and lack of knowledge about the hiring process) contribute to the haphazard process of

recruitment and selection. In addition, many school districts do not have a systematic and structured process in place to recruit and select principals (Anderson, 1991; Clifford et al., 2012).

Within this current climate of school leadership, attention to succession planning has gained momentum within school districts. While some districts continue to seek external candidates, another potential solution to the leadership shortage is the creation of district-level aspiring principal training programs. School districts design “grow your own” preparation programs to prepare individuals for the principalship and increase the internal applicant pool. Through an analysis of the empirical literature, identified gaps led to the formulation of the following research question to explore if there was a significant relationship between hiring type and other relevant variables that impact principal retention.

### **Research Question**

1. Is there a relationship between the internal and external promotion of principals and principal retention in the state of Georgia when controlling for potential covariates?

### **Literature Review**

To gain insight and understand the relationship between the internal and external promotion of school principals and principal retention, this review of literature provides background on current succession planning practices, promotion types (i.e., internal and external promotion), and studies of principal retention. Additionally, the literature review explores a theoretical framework to support the relationship between hiring type and principal retention while underpinning this study’s conceptual framework.

### **Internal and External Promotion**

Typically, there are two recruitment pools of candidates within school systems; internal and external (Pounder & Merrill, 2001). Carlson (1961) asserts that choosing leader candidates from outside the school system would alter what already exists, and by contrast, leader candidates from within the organization stabilize existing structures. Regarding the organization’s health, both internal and external recruitment strategies have their own sets of strengths and weaknesses. Some school districts recruit exclusively internally, others solely recruit externally, and many utilize both strategies (Lee & Keiffer, 2003; Winter et al., 2002). The paucity of research regarding principal succession and hiring practices warrants an investigation of current succession planning practices, internal and external recruitment, and principal turnover factors.

### ***Succession Planning in Education***

Evidence of structured succession plans with components of a well-designed management development system is rare in school districts (Hartle & Thomas, 2003; Tucker & Coddington, 2002). The field of education has been slower to embrace succession planning, creating an absence of measures to ensure a sustainable culture. Likewise, Zepeda et al. (2012) contend that principals’ rapid turnover (i.e., four years or less) results in adverse negative effects on student achievement and school culture. Through the early identification of potential candidates who are provided training, supplied with valuable feedback, and given job-specific experiences, an approach involving planned continuity can be beneficial to effect the change needed to turn around failing schools (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). However, Hargreaves and Fink



(2006) stated that most school succession cases are unplanned, and there is little regard for whether the change will bring continuity or discontinuity.

Although comprehensive succession planning may be absent in many school districts, school districts view certain succession practices and leadership development strategies as more prevalent (Brundrett et al., 2006). School systems implement initiatives such as leadership development programs, coaching, and the creation of executive principal positions to increase applicant pools of qualified future leaders (Hargreaves & Fink, 2011). While examining factors associated with achieving high retention levels among principals, Peters (2011) suggested the need for dynamic principal succession planning to be an integral part of a school's improvement plan and part of the district's expectations.

While a new administration can be a potentially valuable source of renewal, the process of school leadership change may be precarious and problematic. Frequent principal changes could negatively impact a school's efficacy and prove to be disruptive. As an integral component of a school's improvement plan, purposeful succession planning can allow school districts to proactively support leadership and continuity, increasing school effectiveness and sustainability.

### ***Internal Recruitment***

Closely related to the concepts of succession planning within an organization, school systems are looking inward to fill vacancies through internal recruitment strategies (Miskel & Cosgrove, 1985; Schlueter & Walker, 2008; Winter et al., 2002). Goodlad (2004) emphasized the need for an effective strategy for reducing principal turnover by school districts making a concentrated effort to identify employees who possess leadership potential. Many identify this internal recruitment process of candidate identification and hiring of a teacher or assistant principal from within the school or district organization as "tapping."

When considering long-term leadership sustainability, school systems must consider tapping the best teacher leaders to create a pathway for skilled candidates willing to take on the added responsibilities of a school principal (Fink, 2011). Increasing the supply of successors when teacher perceptions concerning the role of the principal are shifting requires careful planning embedded in a structured support system (Davidson & Taylor, 1999; Kim, 2010; Myung et al., 2011; Rhodes & Brundett, 2005).

Some school districts are discovering a need for more formalized procedures aside from tapping to acquire more quality candidates. A "grow your own" approach that actively recruits internal candidates has become more prevalent nationally, demonstrating success in supplying leadership needs for local school districts (Lee & Keiffer, 2003; Winter et al., 2002). In cooperation with university partners, these "grow your own" preparation programs aim to develop and place candidates within the same school district (Gutmore et al., 2009; Versland, 2013) or combine efforts between school districts and university strategies to build principal pipelines (Gates et al., 2019; Myung et al., 2011). "Grow Your Own" programs may also be more effective solutions to help school districts solve their leadership crises due to the use of internal expertise aligned with school district goals and the cost-effectiveness of retaining talented individuals within the district (Joseph, 2009).

Researchers find evidence of support for the hiring of internal candidates throughout the literature on principal succession. They find that internal candidates are a better choice than external candidates because of the perception of an internal candidate's ability to minimize organizational transition disruptions and maintain leadership continuity (Carlson, 1961; Hargreaves et al., 2003; Pounder & Merrill, 2001). Furthermore, internal candidates are seemingly more entrenched in the community and school culture, enabling them to better manage status changes within social group boundaries while maintaining legitimacy (Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006; Hargreaves 2005; Hargreaves et al., 2003). Buckman et al. (2018) study regarding principals in Georgia indicated that internal applicants were better

positioned for advancement within their school or district than external applicants. Additionally, the study concluded that many factors provide a hiring advantage to internal candidates, including the knowledge and experience specific to district protocols, culture, vision, and goals (Buckman et al., 2017).

### ***External Recruitment***

Bidwell (2011) defines internal promotion as a move upward within an organization, often resulting in a higher rank, pay, and skill requirements, while the definition of external promotion includes the hiring of a candidate who will be entering the organization (i.e., school district) for the first time. The increased human capital of external candidates provides support for the hiring, affirming that, on average external candidates have higher levels of education and experience than internal candidates (Chan, 1996; DeVaro et al., 2015). Using this line of reasoning in the educational setting, low performing schools would benefit from seeking principal candidates from high performing schools outside the district.

External candidates do not experience the issues associated with the internal promotion process (i.e., insufficient support, social isolation), fostering optimism toward a new role. As such, this assumption links a barrier of internal recruitment to a potential benefit of external recruitment (Acosta, 2010). Although some districts favor the promotion of internal candidates due to their knowledge of school district culture, Normore's (2004) study involving two large Ontario school districts indicates the need for internal and external promotion.

### **Factors that Influence Turnover**

Many factors contribute to principal turnover, with the highest turnover rates among principals serving in schools with low-income, high minority, and low-achieving students (Beteille et al., 2012; Miller, 2013). A growing body of research has examined the relationships between turnover and the principalship identifying likely determinants of turnover within the principal, school, and district (Donley et al., 2019). Though study methods vary, a wide range of factors (i.e., principal, school, and student characteristics) associated with principal turnover have emerged as statistically significant. Thus, understanding why principals leave is essential to developing strategies to increase retention.

Tekleselassie and Choi (2019) found that principal characteristics are related to principal turnover. Their study determined that the odds of principal turnover increased with the principal's age and decreased with years of experience. Other researchers have identified several principal characteristics that are related to principal turnover, including a principal's gender, race, age, level of experience, and education (Boyce & Bowers, 2016; Donley et al., 2019; Papa, 2007; Rangel, 2018; Tekleselassie & Choi, 2019).

In addition to principal characteristics, several other conditions can influence a principal's employment decision, including the job's complexity, school climate, job satisfaction, level of effectiveness, and salary (Levin & Bradley, 2019). The demands of the job's increased responsibilities and salary have also contributed to principal turnover (Papa, 2005). Likewise, researchers attribute insufficient compensation, stress, and time required to fulfill responsibilities as deterrents to remaining in the role of principal (Pijanowski et al., 2009; Pounder & Merrill, 2001).

Beyond principal demographics, researchers have analyzed school characteristics as a determinant of principal mobility and turnover. Focusing on the relationship between principal turnover and specific school and student characteristics highlights the negative consequences of principal turnover, particularly in schools with high concentrations of poverty and minority students, in addition to failing schools where the leadership turnover rate is one-third higher than at high achieving schools (Beteille et al., 2012). Research points to several school and student characteristics as significant predictors of

principal turnover. School and student level factors supported by research include school performance, school level and size, student achievement, and student socioeconomic status (Baker et al., 2010; Beteille et al., 2012; Fuller et al., 2007; Fuller & Young, 2009; Gates et al., 2006; Ni et al., 2015; Loeb et al., 2010; Papa, 2007; Tekleselassie & Choi, 2019).

### **Theoretical Perspective**

This study utilized three existing human resource development theories to build a conceptual framework for understanding the linkages between internal and external promotion and principal retention. By exploring the characteristics of Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), Tournament Theory (Lazear & Rosen, 1981), and Organizational Commitment Theory (Meyer & Allen, 1997), one can further understand the potential benefits and challenges to the selection processes of school principals. Specifically, these theories highlight conceptual factors that support the practice of internal promotion which are tested to determine if hiring type impact principal retention.

Becker (1964) theorized the importance of three types of human capital investments (i.e., on-the-job training, schooling, and other knowledge) concerning employee rate of return. These investments in education and preparation through specific skill development with on-the-job training provide a rationale for organizations to invest in their employees, creating potential performance increases. More specifically, in the field of education, Human Capital Theory correlates advancement opportunities experienced by internal candidates, based on professional development and specific training programs, with increased employability and performance.

Tournament Theory describes internal career competitions and resulting wage winnings through promotion in connection to internal investments. Lazear and Rosen (1981) based their theory on employee incentives that encourage employees to work hard and perform well to win the ultimate prize of promotion and wage increases.

Stemming from Becker's (1960) side-bet theory, Meyer and Allen's (1997) Organizational Commitment Theory describes how an employee's degree of dedication and psychological attachment to an organization results in employee retention (Meyer & Allen, 1997). Although the Organizational Commitment Theory has connections to Human Capital Theory through hidden investments as well as Tournament Theory in terms of financial motivation, the affective influence proposed by Meyer and Allen (1997) bases employee retention on more than economic factors.

Whereas the theories of Human Capital, Tournament, and Organizational Commitment all share organizational inputs that result in positive organizational outcomes, they also offer structural suggestions to improve employee retention. Despite each theory's unique features, all three share an interrelated goal of employment at the foundation of human resources.

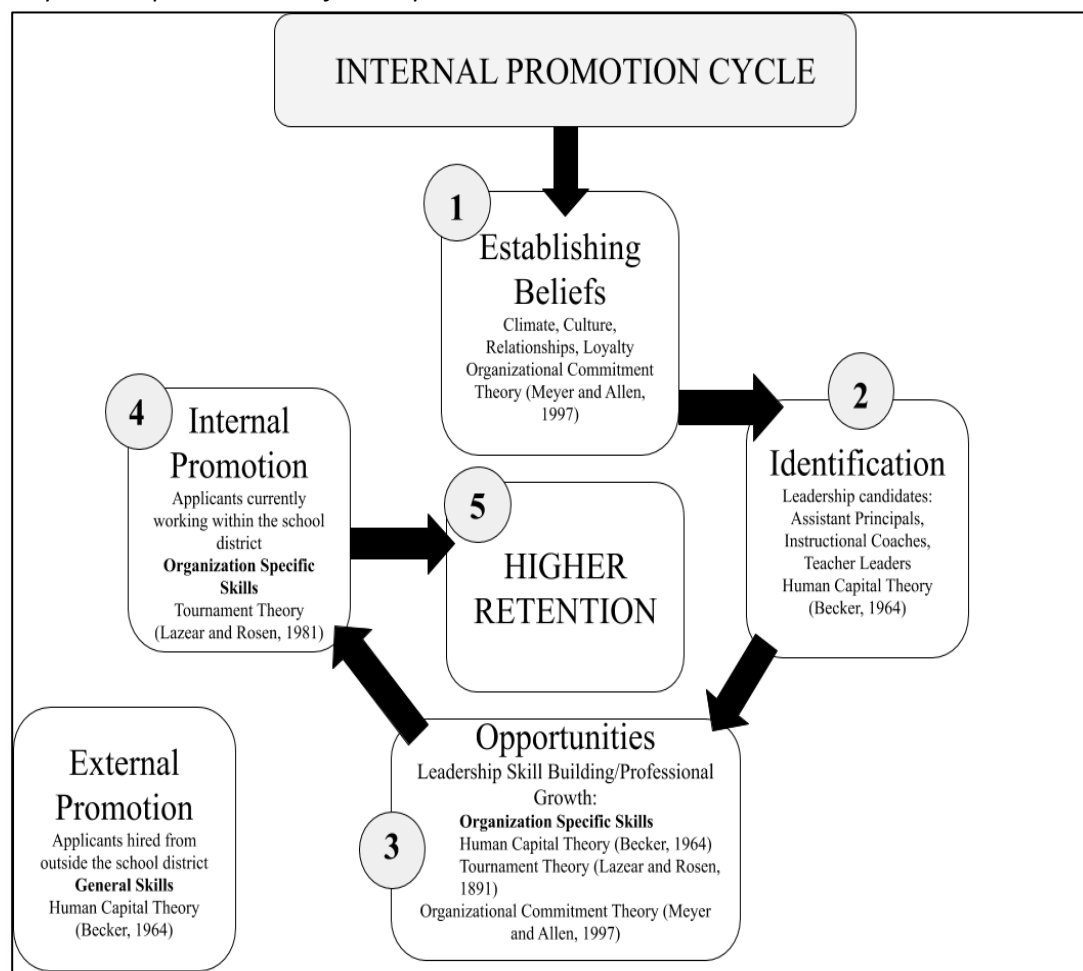
### **Conceptual Framework**

The theories mentioned above related to human resource development have shaped the hiring process within organizations and serve as a theoretical framework that one can conceptually model using the internal promotion cycle. In addition to employee retention, researchers have used the theories highlighted in this section in previous research to explain different employee outcomes such as job satisfaction and employee productivity. As such, the proposed conceptual model, built from a multifaceted theoretical foundation, should assist in explaining why or to what extent promotion type (i.e., internal or external) influences principal retention.

By utilizing a conceptual framework that emerges from aspects of Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), Tournament Theory (Lazear & Rosen, 1981), and Organizational Commitment Theory (Meyer &

Allen, 1997), this study explores the internal promotion process of school principals. The graphical representation shown below in Figure 1 represents the described process of internal promotion leading to retention by depicting the human resource development cycle of school principals through the interrelated theories of Human Capital, Tournament Theory, and Organizational Commitment Theory. This representation of the hiring process and strengthening of the principal pipeline could lead to leadership retention and positive school outcomes.

**Figure 1**  
*Graphical Representation of Conceptual Framework*



### Methodology

As a notable difference from previous research studies, this study utilized panel level data at the principal level across five years to address the research question regarding the relationship between the internal and external promotion of principals and principal retention in the state of Georgia. The use of panel data is significant due to the abundance of information provided, which captures changes in outcomes relative to changes in predictors as compared to cross-sectional studies that only provide snapshots for a single period in time.

Considering the focus of this study was on the retention of traditional public school principals, the study did not utilize data for principals from other types of schools (i.e., private and charter schools).

Traditionally, these types of schools differ from public schools, and therefore their compensation structures, student demographics, and achievement data likely vary from public school principals in nonrepresentative ways. School-level data obtained included school characteristics such as school level, school type, student achievement, student characteristics (i.e., SES, race), and enrollment.

## **Procedure**

The researchers obtained individual principal data as well as school and district information from 2016 through the 2019 academic years from the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) and the Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA) to address the focus on first-year public school principals. To acquire the population of first-year principals for the study, the researchers also requested assistant principal data from 2014 from the GaDOE to identify assistant principals who transitioned from assistant principal to principal across the data sets.

According to research by Boyce and Bowers (2016) on the influence of principals on student achievement, their study showed the principal's effect within schools increases over time. Additionally, effective school leaders need time, usually about five years, to build trust with staff and parents, set a vision for improvement, and hire quality teachers (Miller, 2013). Thus, the research supports the retention metric of five years as minimal and greater than five years as optimal. Using the metric mentioned above, the researcher removed any newly appointed principal who had less than five years of data.

Considering the criteria for inclusion in this study, the researchers identified a total of 230 principals. As a result of lacking school performance data or data errors, which produced missing years of principal level information, the researchers removed 16 principals from the cohort. More interestingly, a significant number of principals disappeared from the data set prior to 2019, and this group of principals resulted in 82 exclusions, which is approximately 38% of the total number of assistant principals promoted to the principalship in 2015. Significantly, this substantial portion of the population depicts a potential lack of leadership stability within schools. However, from the data itself, it cannot be determined if these principals disappeared from the data due to retirement, a form of turnover (e.g., resignation, involuntary termination), or transferred to other positions (e.g., promoted or demoted).

To determine the necessary statistical power needed to address the study's research question, the researchers applied Cohen's (1988) a priori power analysis. By considering the number of independent variables, covariates, level of significance, effect size, and power, a power analysis determines the number of participants needed to reduce potential type-1 or type-2 error within a study. For this study involving eleven covariates and one independent variable, a medium effect size ( $f^2 = .15$ ), a level of significance set at ( $\alpha = .05$ ), and the specific power level at ( $\beta = .80$ ), the analysis recommended a minimum of 127 participants. Notably, the population of principals included in the study consisted of 132 principals, and due to the compounded data over five years, there were 660 data points. As such, statistical power would not be a concern in interpreting the results of the analysis.

## **Variables**

Previous researchers have identified and utilized covariates (i.e., control variables) in principal retention studies (Beteille et al., 2012; Fuller & Young, 2009; Pounder & Merrill, 2001). This study also utilized covariates for reducing the probability of Type I and Type II errors (Huck, 2012). Without covariates, misinterpretation of the relationship between the dependent and independent variables could exist, resulting in inaccurate findings.

## ***Covariates***

Following an extensive review of the literature, eleven relevant covariates impacting principal retention were identified in this study: 1) age (Fuller & Young, 2009; Rangel, 2018); 2) gender (Baker et al., 2010; Fuller et al., 2007; Gates et al., 2006; Rangel, 2018); 3) race (Gates et al., 2006; Oberman, 1996); 4) years of experience (Tran & Buckman, 2017; Podgursky et al., 2016); 5) highest level of education (Baker et al., 2010; Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2010); 6) salary (Baker et al., 2010; Tran & Buckman, 2017; Whitaker, 2003); 7) socioeconomic status (SES) (Beteille et al., 2012; Fuller & Young, 2009; Gates et al., 2006; Loeb et al., 2010; Papa, 2007); 8) school size (Baker et al., 2010; Fuller et al., 2007; Gates et al., 2006; Ni et al., 2015; Tekleselassie & Choi, 2019); 9) school level (Baker et al., 2010; Fuller et al., 2007); 10) student race/ethnicity percentages (Baker et al., 2010; Branch et al., 2008; DeAngelis & White, 2011; Papa, 2007; Podgursky et al., 2016; Yan, 2020); and 11) student achievement (Azaiez & Slate, 2017; Baker et al., 2010; Branch, 2008; DeAngelis & White, 2011; Papa, 2007; Podgursky et al., 2016; Yan, 2020).

The analysis controlled for factors likely to predict principal retention to determine the statistical relationships between internal and external promotion and principal retention. Personal attributes (i.e., age, gender, and race) served as covariates because of the large amount of research documented in empirical literature supporting their relationships with principal turnover (Baker et al., 2010; Fuller & Young, 2009; Gates et al., 2006; Rangel, 2018).

Additionally, the study included principal experience and operationalized it as the total number of years an individual principal had worked in any education agency. The total number of years of experience working in any education agency is how school districts report principals' total experience to the GaDOE.

Professional experience can be a factor connected to principal salary due to the principal's ability to earn an additional step increase on a traditional fixed-rate salary schedule. In Georgia, according to the public educator salary schedule, districts determine pay using two factors: 1) educational level and 2) years of experience defined by each service year completed (GaDOE, 2019). Regarding job stability, researchers have heavily analyzed principal salaries, and the influence of compensation on principal retention is significant (Fuller & Young, 2009). Ordinarily, when a principal earns an advanced degree (e.g., Master's Degree, Educational Specialist Degree, Doctoral Degree), they will receive an increase in salary (GaDOE, 2019).

School characteristics are also a consistent variable used in empirical educational research (Beteille et al., 2012; Burkhauser et al., 2012; Gates et al., 2006; Papa et al., 2005; Taie & Goldring, 2017). Likewise, the school environment has significant effects on principals' decisions to stay in the profession or transition to a different school, district, or career. Therefore, SES, school size, school type (i.e., elementary, middle, high), student race/ethnicity percentages, and student achievement data help determine the relationship between internal and external promotion and principal retention.

## ***Independent variable***

The independent variable manipulated in this study was hiring type, which the researchers identified as either the internal or external promotion of an assistant principal to the role of principal. Internal hires were those assistant principals whom the district promoted within the district where they served as an assistant principal, and external hires were assistant principals hired from outside the school district to the role of principal. As an independent variable, this study identified if hiring type impacted principal retention.

### ***Dependent variable***

This study's dependent variable was principal turnover operationalized by the number of times a principal changed schools during the observation period. The researchers used a logistical regression analysis to determine whether there was a significant relationship between the principal's hiring type and principal retention.

### **Data Analysis and Results**

Descriptive and inferential statistics were employed to address the research question and describe the data in this study. The researchers utilized descriptive statistics (i.e., central tendency and frequencies) to summarize and describe the independent, dependent, and control variables. Inferential statistics served to identify the relationship between the independent variable, dependent variable, and all covariates.

#### ***Descriptive Statistics***

Principal level data collected from the Georgia Department of Education included race (i.e., White, African American/Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latino, Multi-racial), gender, level of education, and school level. Due to the low response rate of races other than white or black, the researchers categorized race into two groups (i.e., white and non-white). The population of newly hired principals in 2015 included 56.8% females and 43.2% males (see Table 1). While there is a historical trend of males holding the majority of school principal positions (Matthews & Crow, 2003), females accounted for the majority of the principal group, which is consistent with literature concerning gender and females holding the employment majority within the educational workforce (Ellis & Bernhardt, 1992; Moore, 2012; Perie & Baker, 1997).

The researchers operationalized the education level of principals by degrees earned (i.e., Master's, Specialist's, or Doctorate). It is important to note that the educational degree percentages reflect 660 data points capturing over five years of data for each participant with the opportunity for principals to earn degrees and change educational levels over time (see Table 1). Likewise, the data representing the school level of present employment by each principal from 2015-2019 was also subject to change over time. Elementary, middle, high, and combined were the four categories used by the researchers to define school level.

To capture hiring type, the researchers identified the participants serving in the role of assistant principal in 2014 and subsequently promoted to a principalship in 2015 and coded them as internally or externally promoted. Internally promoted are those principals hired within the same school district where they worked as assistant principals. Thus, the researchers coded Georgia assistant principals who moved from one district to another to gain employment as a principal as external. In 2015, Georgia school districts predominantly hired first-time principals from within the district where they were currently employed (90.2%, see Table 1).

As shown in Table 1, the researchers captured principal turnover from 2015-2019 using dummy codes to represent the movement of principals between school districts within the state of Georgia. The researchers coded principals that remained at the same school during the given year as "0", indicating no turnover, while principals who moved to a different school within the same district or to another district within the state of Georgia were coded as "1", indicating a turnover during the year that the movement took place. Over the five years, 95.9% of principals hired in 2015 exhibited no turnover by either intra-district or inter-district moves (see Table 1).

**Table 1***Descriptive Statistics: Frequencies and Percentages*

Variable	Frequency	Percent
<i>Race</i>		
White	87	65.9
Non-White	45	34.1
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	57	43.2
Female	75	56.8
<i>Educational Level</i>		
Masters	113	17.1
Specialist	409	62.0
Doctorate	138	20.9
<i>School Level</i>		
Elementary	378	57.3
Middle	166	25.2
High	110	16.7
Combined	6	.8
<i>Hiring Type</i>		
Internal	119	90.2
External	13	9.8
<i>Turnover</i>		
No Turnover	633	95.9
Turnover	24	3.6

In addition to personal demographic information, education level, and school level of employment, the study analyzed other individual and workplace information through continuous variables associated with both the individual principal characteristics (i.e., age, years of experience, salary) as well as characteristics of the schools (i.e., SES%, school size, student race, CCRPI) in which the principals worked from 2015-2019.

Principal age ranged from a minimum of 32 to a maximum of 60 years, with years of experience ranging from 0 to 38 years. The total number of years of experience working in an education agency is how school districts report personnel experience to the Georgia Department of Education for salary and certification purposes and define principal experience. Lastly, principals' annual salaries ranged from a minimum earning of \$52,964.00 to a maximum compensation of \$153,571.68. It is important to note that these ranges take place over 660 data points and a period of five years (see Table 2). A principal's salary can increase with years of experience, level of education, and local supplements.

The researchers obtained percentages of socioeconomically disadvantaged students from the reporting of students qualified to receive free and/or reduced-price lunches each year. Vast economic disparities between schools ranged from a minimum of 4% of students to a maximum of 100% of students enrolled in the free/reduced program and categorized as economically disadvantaged. In addition, school



sizes ranged from a minimum enrollment of 97 students to a maximum size of 4,099 students (see Table 2). Furthermore, student race percentages (i.e., white and non-white students) represent a diverse range of school demographics, ranging from 6.9% non-white students to 100%. Finally, College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) scores served as proxies for student achievement, and the GaDOE calculates the indicator using a 100-point scale. The state combines four main components of CCRPI (i.e., achievement, progress, achievement gap, and challenge points) for a total CCRPI score on a scale of 0 to 100, with a possibility of 10 additional points, which accounts for the maximum score (i.e., 110). Student performance scores ranged from a minimum of 29.6% to a maximum of 110%, with an average of 75.35% (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Descriptive Statistics: Central Tendency*

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Age	660	32	60	44.3	5.49
Years of experience	660	0	38	19.65	6.01
SES %	660	4.0	100	66.175	28.89
Salary	660	52964.00	153571.68	99899.00	141132.47
School size	660	97	4099	868.35	557.18
Student Race	660	6.9	100.0	63.45	27.97
CCRPI	660	29.6	110	75.35	12.63

***Inferential Statistics***

To address the study's research question (i.e., the relationship between hiring type [i.e., internal or external] and principal retention), the researchers used a random-effects logistical regression mode, entered the variables into the analysis using a simultaneous order of entry (Huck, 2012), and set the minimum level of statistical significance at  $p < 0.05$ .

The researcher used a logistical regression analysis to analyze the categorical or binary dependent variable, independent variable, and covariates to address the research question. A Hausman Test determined the need for a random-effects or fixed-effects panel data model. The result of the Hausman Test demonstrated no statistically significant differences between the estimators. As such, the researchers used a random-effects model. In terms of statistical assumptions, an accepted variance inflation factor (VIF) of less than 3.0 determined multicollinearity, and no variables in the analyses exceeded this threshold.

When examining the ability of the independent variable and covariates: (hiring type, race, gender, age, degree level, years of experience, salary, SES%, school size, school level, student race, CCRPI) to predict the dependent variable of principal turnover, the analysis found hiring type was not statistically significant (see Table 3). However, the variables of principal race ( $b = -26$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ ) and CCRPI scores ( $b = -.36$ ,  $p \leq 0.05$ ) did present statistical significance. The race of the principal had a negative slope, indicating that non-white principals were less likely to turnover than white principals. Likewise, the school CCRPI scores (i.e., school achievement) also had a negative slope, indicating that principal turnover decreased as CCRPI scores increased.

**Table 3***Random-Effects Logistic Regression Model of Principal Turnover*

Variable	Coef.	Robust Std. Err.	z	P > [z]	[95% Conf. Interval]
ID	.0083726	.0059261	1.41	0.158	-.0032424 .0199876
Race	-.25506	.4710953	-2.66	0.008**	-2.17839 -.3317301
Gender	.0105147	.2591818	0.04	0.968	-.4974723 .51850169
Age	-.0138414	.009785	-1.41	0.157	-.330196 .0053368
Degree Level	.2237489	.4760439	0.47	0.638	-.70928 1.56778
Experience	-.0658592	.0646794	-1.02	0.309	-.1926285 .0609102
Salary	-.0000263	.0000214	-23	0.219	-.0000682 .0000156
SES %	-.0073351	.0222226	-0.33	0.741	-.0508905 .0362204
School Size	-.0000585	.0001947	-0.30	0.764	-.00044 .0003231
School Level	.8490857	.4650057	1.83	0.068	-.0623088 1.76048
Student Race	.0044496	.0042112	1.06	0.291	-.0038041 .0127033
CCRPI	-.0357388	.0170016	-2.10	0.036*	-.0690613 -.0024164
Hiring Type	.5817256	.9412761	0.62	0.537	-2.63142 2.426593

(Std. Err. adjusted for 5 clusters in Fiscal Year)

Note. \*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**Sub-Analysis of Removed Participants**

Although 132 principals met the criteria (i.e., 2015 promotion, 2015-2019 data) for inclusion in the study cohort, school districts promoted 82 principals in 2015 but disappeared from the dataset before 2019. Overall, the principals included in the sub-analysis displayed similar characteristics with those in the study cohort. The descriptive data, including race, gender, education level, and school level, is comparable with that of the study group.

While the descriptive data of principal characteristics in the sub-analysis mentioned thus far was similar to the panel data used in the research study, the independent variable of hiring type depicts a difference in the sub-analysis group. Internal hires represented 80.5% of the subgroup. With this increase in the percentage of external hires represented in the group of principals who disappeared from the dataset before 2019 (e.g., from 9.9% to 19.5%), these findings suggest externally hired principals have a greater propensity to turnover.

Of the 82 principals in the sub-analysis group, 23.2% turned over after one year in the principalship, 15.9% after two years, 25.6% after three years, and 35.4% after four years. With 38% of the total number of principals hired in 2015 represented in this sub-analysis population and the percentages of turnover each year, this data regarding turnover further substantiates principal stability concerns.

The continuous variables describing individual principal characteristics (i.e., age, years of experience, salary) depict a few noteworthy findings concerning age and salary. Although a principal's salary increases as a result of experience, education, and local school district supplements, the maximum age of 66 as well as the maximum years of experience of 41 are both higher in the subgroup population than those in the study group, which could attribute turnover to retirement. Another difference noted is the minimum salary of the subgroup was higher than that of the study group (i.e., \$52,964.00- \$66,650.00) while the maximum earnings for the subgroup were lower (i.e., \$153,571.68- \$127,196.07). This finding could suggest principal movement is associated with the pursuit of higher salaries.

### Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the empirical literature on the practices of internal and external promotion and principal retention by investigating whether there was a significant relationship between hiring type and principal turnover for public school principals in the state of Georgia when controlling for potential covariates. Though the effect of the logistic regression analysis when including the independent variable, hiring type, ( $b = .581, p \leq 0.05$ ), was not statistically significant, the variables of principal race ( $b = -26, p \leq 0.01$ ) and CCRPI scores ( $b = -.36, p \leq 0.05$ ) yielded significance.

The covariate of principal race ( $b = -26, p \leq 0.01$ ; see Table 3) indicated that non-white principals had higher retention rates than white principals. Research by Oberman (1996) supports a higher turnover rate in white principals, and another study linked principal race with student demographics as a possible reason for decreased turnover among non-white principals (Gates et al., 2006). Further findings suggest that white principals were almost 60% more likely than principals of other races to leave the principalship for a promotion, which could account for the increased turnover among white principals found in this study (Fuller et al., 2007).

The study's findings also indicated school CCRPI scores were statistically significant ( $b = -.36, p \leq 0.05$ ; see Table 3), indicating that as CCRPI scores increased, principal turnover decreased. This finding is consistent with numerous previous studies connecting principal movement to low-performing schools (Burkhauser et al., 2012; DeAngelis & White, 2011; Fuller & Young, 2009; Loeb et al., 2010). Likewise, research has linked principal retention to increased academic achievement (Ni et al., 2015). By building organizational capacity through professional learning aligned with the instructional mission and vision of the school district, an organization can establish a belief system and employ tenets of Organizational Commitment Theory (Meyer & Allen, 1997). Though the study did not find hiring type to be statistically significant with principal turnover, the practicality of the findings supports developing internal candidates and promoting internal hiring initiatives to increase the stability of the principal workforce.

Before discussing the implications of the research findings, it is essential to discuss the difference between statistical significance and practical significance. Hypothesis testing accounts for statistical significance, which is strongly related to sample size. Whether the effect has practical importance is an entirely different question, be it significant or not. For this study, it is worth considering if the main findings are practically significant enough to change school district hiring practices.

The sub-analysis of the 82 principals removed from the cohort study revealed a larger percentage of externally hired principals who turned over prior to 2019. In addition, with the absence of statistical significance in the logistic regression, it is worth noting that the coefficient was positive for hiring type (i.e., external promotion), indicating externally promoted principals included in the study were more likely

to turnover than internally promoted principals ( $b = .581$ ; see Table 3). Finding statistical significance of sample data is vital. After all, significant findings indicate the study's results are likely representative of the population; however, this study using population data as opposed to sample data removes the need for statistical significance because the results display real population trends. Due to the argument raised when analyzing a population versus a sample, this data suggests externally hired principals are at greater risk of turnover. In combination with the sub-analysis, the findings from the study cohort provide strength to the conceptual framework embedded with human resource development theories (i.e., Human Capital Theory, Tournament Theory, and Organizational Commitment Theory) and constructed around the internal promotion cycle.

## Implications

The job of the school principal has become increasingly complex, evolving into a role where districts require a significant amount of expertise for effectiveness. These factors contribute to leadership complexity and the expectation that principals are now business managers, instructional leaders, community engagement experts, data analysts, and marketers for the school. Even so, the job structure remains the same, and the level of support does not differ from decades past (Fuller & Young, 2009). Findings in this study, developed from examining the data and current literature, are informative to all stakeholders (i.e., aspiring and existing school leadership applicants, district human resources officers, legislators, and researchers) and contribute to the literature on principal hiring and turnover.

By providing quality professional development, leadership preparation programs (i.e., grow your own programs), and school support initiatives, school districts can enhance the principal's likelihood of retention (Donley et al., 2019). Furthermore, Tekleselassie and Villarreal (2011) assert the access to internships, mentoring, and preparation programs significantly reduce a principal's turnover intentions. Such programs that furnish specific preparation to groom principals to work in challenging schools and also offer a continuance of support and development for those principals increase the odds of producing leaders who will remain in those school settings (Davis et al., 2005; Sutchter et al., 2017).

Along with the practical significance of internal promotion, the study identified the variables of principal race and CCRPI scores had a significant relationship with principal retention. Previous studies support the finding regarding principal race, linking principal's race with the students' race, and higher principal retention (Gates et al., 2006). There is also sufficient evidence in studies pertaining to succession planning to support a "good fit" while increasing diversity among administrators (Greer & Virick, 2008; Jones & Webber, 2001).

School CCRPI scores were statistically significant ( $b = -.36, p \leq 0.05$ ; see Table 3), indicating that as CCRPI scores increased, principal turnover decreased. Researchers have directly linked efforts to uncover motivating factors to become a school administrator to the principal's desire to impact students' lives and the perceived ability to initiate change (Harris et al., 2000; Moore, 2000; Pounder & Merrill, 2001). School districts could emphasize the ability to initiate effective change or positively impact others by highlighting vision setting, school improvement processes, and efforts in professional development (Hancock et al., 2006). The theory of organizational commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1997) supports the idea that establishing common beliefs with potential leadership candidates is a means of motivating positive change while enhancing self-efficacy promotes retention.

A noteworthy finding involving principal salary in the subgroup analysis contributes to a growing knowledge regarding the influence of adequate compensation on employee retention. The maximum salary of the subgroup who left the principalship was lower than the study cohort (i.e., \$153,571.68-\$127,196.07), indicating those principals potentially left in search of higher wages. Tran and Buckman (2017) found principals could leverage higher salaries if they moved to positions in other districts.

Conversely, districts limited the principals' salaries if they remained in the same district, concluding that a principal's long-term earnings will not differ substantially from their initial earnings if they choose to remain in the same district (Tran & Buckman, 2017).

Also, Hancock et al. (2006) conclude that increased compensation, positional advancement, and enhanced prestige or status were significant in attracting potential candidates to the principalship. With the increase in compensation, school districts could incentivize highly effective principals to move to high-need schools by providing increased decision-making autonomy, allowing strong leaders to bring their teams, and allocating resources toward targeted professional development.

Stressful working conditions, inadequate job incentives, ineffective hiring practices, and perhaps unreasonable expectations for success are deterring prospective candidates from entering the field of educational administration. Strategies focusing on adding more certified people to the principal pipeline through the expansion of training programs or increasing internal recruitment and mentoring programs will not completely solve the leadership challenge. Although hiring agents often tout efforts to attract the best possible candidates, district leaders should explore improving working conditions and providing adequate incentives as methods to improve retention (Mitang, 2003).

## **Limitations**

With the communication of the study findings, there is also an interpretation of the study's limitations. The primary limitation of this study is the researchers' exclusion of 16 principals from the cohort due to an absence of school data. While these 16 participants may not have had a critical impact on the study, their inclusion could have contributed to the findings and impacted the results. Also, the researchers' limited the study's population to principals in the state of Georgia who were first-year principals in 2015 and tracked through 2019. Acknowledging that data errors could have changed the outcome of the findings, with 132 participants, the population was sufficient to yield adequate results, and therefore those excluded principals were not part of the turnover conversation.

Another limitation of similar studies is the variance in variable definition. Researchers can operationally define variables differently, yielding different data outcomes. For example, the use of CCRPI data to define school performance rather than other specific content (i.e., reading or math proficiency scores) data or coding turnover as a dichotomous variable are discretionary decisions of the researcher and hence subject to differing results.

An additional factor is the existence of an "unwritten" school district policy for internal hiring. Without awareness of which school districts employ internal recruitment strategies, the full understanding of how hiring type impacts principal retention limits a study. Non-monetary strategies employed by school systems (i.e., leadership academies, mentoring, professional development) build attachments to the organization fostering organizational commitment. However, the researchers could not control individuals who left the principalship resulting in their removal from the data set; therefore, this study focused on decisions made about those that remained in the dataset.

Since the primary finding of this study was unable to establish statistical significance, grounds for future research could include the differentiation between voluntary and involuntary turnover by capturing turnover differently. As such, the focus of this study was on the position of principal and did not track or account for turnover into other school district positions, which would include district promotions to roles other than school principal (e.g., directors, assistant superintendents) that researchers could document and influence findings. Insight concerning why one chooses to leave the principalship could lead to future research on the types of turnover, creating a better understanding of the decisions surrounding principal movement while also impacting the prevention of principal turnover within school districts.

## Conclusion

This body of research intended to add to the limited empirical literature regarding the relationship between hiring practices of school principals and principal retention. Principal turnover continues to be a significant problem facing district leaders and public policymakers. Likewise, the impact of the principal on the school environment is substantial, and the need for well-qualified principals committed to leading today's schools will continue. While this study did not indicate a statistically significant relationship between the hiring type of Georgia principals from 2015 and principal turnover, it is important to note that 90.2% of the principals in the study cohort were internal hires, and 95.9% of those principals had no turnover during the five years from 2015-2019.

In line with previous research, the analysis of these findings supports formal succession planning and internal leadership development practices. Principal turnover is a complex issue combining the need to understand organizational leadership, systems, change, and human motivation. It is further complicated by a profession under intense pressure to reform with even more intense pressures to succeed. District leaders can enhance the future of education by providing current school leaders and future school leaders ongoing support, competitive compensation, and a job structure that allows them more time to focus on school and district goals and priorities. Most importantly, these efforts may also result in keeping effective principals at their current schools.

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# Effectiveness of Principal Preparation Per the NELP Standards: An Assessment of One University's Performance

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the International Council of Professors of Educational Leadership (ICPEL) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



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*Quality preparation of school leaders is important for school success and improved student outcomes. The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of principal alumni and superintendents about the quality of a university's principal preparation program in relation to the NELP Standards. Utilizing survey methodology, anonymous responses were collected from 74 practicing principals who are graduates of the program asking how well prepared they were for their school leadership roles. Survey responses were also collected from 38 superintendents across our state regarding their perceptions about the university's preparation of principals based on their experiences working with principal graduates hired within the last three years. Both principal and superintendent respondents agreed that program graduates were overall well-prepared per the NELP Standards, with 100% of principal alumni reporting they would recommend the program to others. Respondents also provided narrative suggestions and several areas were noted for further review and to inform program improvement. These results are useful in the pursuit of continued advancement of the field of leadership education by providing information beneficial in assessing and further developing university preparation programs for school leaders.*

**Keywords:** principal preparation, NELP standards, school leadership, building-level administrator training

In order to develop the skills, knowledge, practices, and commitments necessary for school leaders to meet the demands of today's increasingly diverse and complex school environments, it is essential that school principals be effectively prepared for their positions (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2020; Young & Crow, 2016). Today's principal candidates should be able to demonstrate awareness, understanding, and application of many specialized skills, as outlined in the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Standards for Building-Level Leadership Preparation (NPBEA, 2018). Mastery of the NELP Standards promotes principal candidates' abilities to lead collaboratively and effectively with the goal of heightening opportunities and achievement for all students (Young et al., 2018).

In the Midwest state of this study (Indiana), candidates must be prepared by a university with a "state approved program" to be eligible for building-level administrative (principal's) licensure. Since licensure is the line of demarcation between whether a candidate is adequately prepared or not, great care must be taken to ensure that universities with approved principal licensure programs effectively perform their preparatory function. The ultimate test of whether this happens consists of assessing the actual field performance of the program's graduates. The research reported in this paper involved such an assessment. The research team evaluated the quality of their university's principal preparation program through a two-fold process. First, we surveyed program alumni currently serving as school principals with the goal of gathering graduates' perceptions on how well prepared they were by the university on seven NELP Standards for Building-Level Leadership Preparation (NPBEA, 2018). Second, we surveyed those who supervise and work with principals - their superintendents, regarding their perceptions of preparation adequacy by the university on the same seven NELP Standards.

### **Connection to Literature**

The principal's role is complex, demanding, and central to school effectiveness (Marzano et al., 2005; Seashore et al., 2010; Swensson & Lehman, 2021). A sizeable body of empirical evidence has revealed that principals make a significant difference in student achievement and overall school success (Grissom et al., 2015; Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005). Studies have connected effective principal leadership with increased student learning (Branch et al., 2013; Grissom et al., 2015; Hallinger, 2011); improved teacher satisfaction (Rice, 2010); and a wide-range of more discrete school outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2010; Edition, 2013; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2020).

Studies have also examined the specific qualities or practices that make some school leaders more effective than others. In particular, strong instructional leadership by the principal has been found to be a significant variable in promoting student achievement (Drummond, 2019; Hallinger, 2011; Seashore et al., 2010). This includes creating conditions that strengthen teaching and learning school-wide, and also recognizing and commending individuals who demonstrate commitments to outstanding teaching and learning (Thompson, 2017).

In addition to instructional leadership, effective principals set high standards for student achievement and behavior, while developing positive and caring school climates (Louis et al., 2010; Swensson & Lehman, 2021). Effective principals understand how to create a vision that maintains focus on learning in a safe and cooperative environment while cultivating leadership in others, supporting teachers, and being a skillful manager (Edition, 2013). In sum, there is clear and mounting evidence that effective principals who emphasize instructional leadership, establish vision and high standards, employ best practices and strong management skills, and develop collaborative relationships; can improve school conditions, heighten student outcomes, and even turn around failing schools (Branch et al., 2013; Bryk, 2010; Drummond, 2019; Leithwood et al., 2004; Seashore et al., 2010; Swensson & Lehman, 2021).

As the body of research regarding the importance of quality school leadership has grown, so has

the call for higher quality principal preparation (Anderson et al., 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Perrone & Tucker, 2019). The quality of preparation that candidates receive makes a difference (Anderson et al., 2018; Young, 2015) and specific programs attributes, such as faculty quality, program rigor, program relevance, and internship quality, have been found to have a significant impact on graduates' standards-based leadership learning (Ni et al., 2019).

However, concerns have been raised that some principal preparation programs are mired in the past as expectations for principals have evolved in recent years and the role has expanded to include more responsibilities; generating new questions about how to define, prepare, and evaluate principals (Osterman & Hafner, 2009; Perrone & Tucker, 2019; Young, 2015). Also, a recent expansion in the number of principal preparation programs in the US has raised concerns about variations in the quality and rigor of some programs (Grissom et al., 2019; Perrone & Tucker, 2019). A report supported by the Wallace Foundation suggested that many district-level leaders were unhappy with the preparation of principals (Mendels, 2016). Furthermore, questions have been posed about some preparation programs being disconnected with the field and inadequate in preparing candidates for the authentic and inclusive school leadership needed in an increasingly complex and diverse society (Kemp-Graham, 2015; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2020).

Based on these concerns, researchers and practitioners in P-12 administration have called for school leaders to be better prepared to improve schools and serve all students; including ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse students (Osterman & Hafner, 2009); students living in poverty (Dudley-Marling & Dudley-Marling, 2020); students with disabilities (Theoharis & Scanlan, 2020); and students who identify as LGBTQ or otherwise gender diverse (Kemp-Graham, 2015). The NELP Handbook clarifies that "Strong preparation of school leaders includes attention to the learning and needs of all student sub-groups as well as individual students" (NPBEA, 2018, p. 7). Educational leadership faculty members can use the NELP Standards to guide curricular and pedagogical developments as this set of research-based knowledge, skills, and practices promote strong school leadership preparation designed to improve learning and school conditions for all P-12 students.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate perceptions of the quality of principal preparation that our university offers pursuant to the NELP Standards. This information was sought in order to assess the department's implementation and delivery of standards-based curricula and to inform future program improvements. There were two research questions:

1. Per the NELP Standards, how well-prepared do principal alumni feel that our program prepared them for their roles?
2. Per the NELP Standards, how well-prepared do superintendents feel that recently hired principals from our program were for their roles?

### **Conceptual Framework**

As discussed in the "Connection to Literature" section, it has been theorized and demonstrated through research that effective principals make a significant positive difference for student achievement and overall school success (Grissom et al., 2015; Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2020; Thompson, 2017). The idea that effective principals are important "difference-makers" provided the groundwork for this study, while the NELP Building-Level Leadership Standards provided the conceptual framework because these standards, if implemented with fidelity, facilitate successful preparation of program graduates who have the knowledge and skills to begin making

a positive difference for their schools and students upon becoming administrators. The NELP Standards are grounded in decades of research and best practices in school leadership (Young et al., 2018). These standards “... represent the fundamental knowledge, skills, and practices intrinsic to developing leadership that improves student learning and well-being” (NPBEA, 2018, p. 7). The NELP Standards clearly specify what principal preparation program candidates should know and be able to demonstrate upon graduation. The standards’ components provide connecting experiences between relevant theory, research, and effective leadership practices (NPBEA, 2018).

The NELP Standards serve as the framework for the principal preparation program at our university, which is nationally recognized and is the largest preparer of principals in our state. The NELP Standards 1-7 that were assessed in this study, included the following:

1. *Mission, Vision, and School Improvement* – Standard 1 contains two components that address the collaborative development of a school’s mission and vision, and the ability of the candidate to plan and lead school improvement processes utilizing data.
2. *Ethics and Professional Norms* - Standard 2 consists of three components, which include professional norms, ethical behavior, and the candidate’s ability to evaluate, communicate and advocate for legal and ethical decisions.
3. *Equity, Inclusiveness, and Cultural Responsiveness* - Standard 3 has three components that focus on the candidate’s ability to create a supportive and inclusive school culture that promotes culturally responsive practices and equitable access to support and resources.
4. *Learning and Instruction* - Standard 4 consists of four components that promote the candidate’s ability to provide high quality, equitable, technology-rich curricula programs that employ best instructional practices and data-informed assessment systems.
5. *Community and External Leadership* - Standard 5 contains three components that promote the candidate’s ability to engage with and advocate for students and families, and to develop productive partnerships with school stakeholders and the community to meet students’ needs.
6. *Operations and Management* - Standard 6 consists of three components that promote effective school management and operations systems, including candidate’s appropriate use of data and resources, and the effective implementation of policies, laws, and regulations.
7. *Building Professional Capacity* – Standard 7 has four components focused on human resources management, creating a positive and professional school culture, facilitating ongoing professional learning for faculty/staff, and effective supervision and evaluation of faculty/staff.

## **Methods**

The goal of this study was to obtain information from principal alumni and our state’s superintendents regarding their perceptions of our principal preparation program per the NELP Standards. Descriptive and inferential analyses of quantitative responses were conducted to provide an overall view of perceptions of program effectiveness and also comparisons of several demographic variables. In addition, an open-ended question was included to gather respondents’ narrative suggestions on ways the principal preparation program could be improved.

### **Study Design and Survey Instrument**

We used an anonymous online survey approach to collect responses. The two surveys (one for principal alumni and one for superintendents) were developed by the research team and were assessed for both validity and reliability. To establish content validity, the NELP survey items were written to directly align with the NELP Standards. Experts in the development of educational surveys reviewed the

face, construct, and content validity of the surveys. After receiving feedback, several revisions were made to improve wording and flow of the instruments. Then, to establish internal consistency, Cronbach's alphas were computed utilizing the quantitative responses of the seven NELP items. The principal alumni survey scored an overall Cronbach's alpha score of  $\alpha = .87$ , and the superintendent survey obtained an alpha of  $\alpha = .85$ , with both values considered good for instrument reliability (Gliem & Gliem, 2003).

The principal survey first gathered respondents' demographic information (e.g., gender, years of experience, years since completed the program). Principals and superintendents were also asked to provide data about their schools including student enrollments and community type and size. Then, using a Likert-type scale (4=Strongly Agree, 3=Agree, 2=Disagree, 1=Strongly Disagree), "perception" questions were asked for each NELP 1-7 Standard employing language taken directly from that standard (NPBEA, 2018). For example, for Standard 1, principals were asked to respond to the item, "I was well prepared by Ball State University in my capacity to lead and successfully implement a school's mission, vision, and school improvement plan." For superintendents, the Standard 1 item was, "Ball State University graduates who have been hired in the last three years as principals have been well prepared in their capacity to lead and successfully implement a school's mission, vision, and school improvement plan."

After the NELP questions, we asked principal respondents their "overall" views on their preparation and whether or not they would recommend the program to others. We asked superintendents if they would hire other graduates from our program in the future. Then, an open-ended item asked respondents to provide narrative suggestions on how the program could be improved. These narrative responses were coded and categorized into emerging themes.

## **Sample**

To administer the surveys, 267 practicing principal alumni and all public school superintendents in the state ( $N = 314$ ) were surveyed in April 2021. The principal survey had 74 usable responses for analyses (27.7% response rate), and the superintendent survey had 38 usable responses (12.10% response rate). Demographic data on both groups will be presented next.

### ***Principals***

Of the 74 principals respondents, 67.1% identified as male and 32.9% as female. Most principals had spent 6-10 years as a principal (32.9%), followed by 3-5 years (27.4%), 11 or more years (23.2%), and 1-2 years (16.4%). The majority had completing the program 3 to 10 years ago (68.5%), with 26% completing 11 or more years ago and 5.5% 1 to 2 years ago.

Of the schools in our sample, schools in rural settings represented (38.4%), followed by suburban (23.3%), urban (19.2%) and small towns (19.2%). Most of the schools had student enrollments between 301 and 1,000 (83.5%). The percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced meals ranged primarily from 21-60% (72.6%), with 17.8% greater than 61% qualifying. Forty-nine principals reported less than 20% minority students at their schools (67.1%), with 18 reporting between 21-60% (24.7%), and six (8.2%) reported more than 61% minority students.

### ***Superintendents***

Of the 38 superintendent respondents, most had 6-9 years of experience as a superintendent (39.5%), with years of experience similarly dispersed at approximately 30% among other years of experience (1-5 years, 11+ years). Rural school districts were most widely represented (55.3%), followed by suburban (23.7%), urban (10.5%), and small towns (7.9%). The majority of superintendents were from



districts with 41% to 80% of students qualifying for free and reduced meals (59.5%), and from districts with 20% or less minority students (75.7%).

## Results

### Research Question 1: Principal Survey

Our first research question asked, “How well-prepared do principal alumni feel that the program prepared them?” The following sections describe the findings driven by this question with NELP Standards considered individually, and as a whole.

#### Quantitative – Principals

A grand mean representing average perceived preparedness to implement NELP Standards 1-7 was calculated. The grand mean of NELP scores was  $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = .46$ , which rested between strongly agree and agree, and indicated a high level of preparedness in implementing NELP Standards as a result of the program. In addition to favorable preparedness, we found that 100% of candidates agreed or strongly agreed that they would recommend the principal preparation program to others ( $M = 3.64$ ,  $SD = .48$ ). Table 1 presents these data.

**Table 1**

*Principal Alumni Responses Regarding their Program Preparation Per the NELP Standards.*

Survey Item:	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Strongly Agree <i>n</i> (%)	Agree <i>n</i> (%)	Disagree <i>n</i> (%)	Strongly Disagree <i>n</i> (%)
I was well-prepared in my capacity to lead in...							
NELP Standard 1	74	3.42	0.57	34 (45.9%)	37 (50%)	3 (4.1%)	0
NELP Standard 2	73	3.62	0.49	45 (61.6%)	28 (38.4%)	0	0
NELP Standard 3	74	3.39	0.64	34 (45.9%)	36 (48.6%)	3 (4.1%)	1 (1.4%)
NELP Standard 4	72	3.36	0.66	32 (44.4%)	35 (48.6%)	4 (5.6%)	1 (1.4%)
NELP Standard 5	73	3.44	0.58	35 (47.9%)	35 (47.9%)	3 (4.1%)	0
NELP Standard 6	73	3.59	0.62	47 (64.4%)	23 (31.5%)	2 (2.7%)	1 (1.4%)
NELP Standard 7	74	3.39	0.59	33 (44.6%)	37 (50%)	4 (5.4%)	0
Overall, I was well-prepared.	73	3.58	0.50	42 (57.5%)	31 (42.5%)	0	0
I would recommend the program to others	74	3.64	0.48	47 (63.5%)	27 (36.5%)	0	0

*Note.* Likert-Type Scale: 4=Strongly Agree, 3=Agree, 2=Disagree, 1=Strongly Disagree

To further investigate these data, potential differences in principals’ demographic variables were analyzed. First, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted to look for significant differences in NELP preparedness scores between men ( $n = 49$ ) and women ( $n = 24$ ) principals. The results demonstrated that significant differences were not present in perceived NELP preparedness across gender,  $p = .601$ , suggesting that men ( $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = .46$ ) and women ( $M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = .41$ ) viewed their NELP principal preparation program similarly.

Next, we conducted a one-way ANOVA that compared experience levels of 1-2 years ( $n = 12$ ,  $M = 3.41$ ,  $SD = .32$ ), 3-5 years ( $n = 20$ ,  $M = 3.38$ ,  $SD = .60$ ), 6-10 years ( $n = 24$ ,  $M = 3.42$ ,  $SD = .40$ ), and 11+ years

( $n = 17$ ,  $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = .38$ ). Total years spent as principal did not show a consistent upward trend in preparedness scores as one might expect. According to Levene's test, the homogeneity of variance assumption was not met in this analysis,  $F(3,69) = 5.19$ ,  $p = .003$ , and differences in NELP scores across the various experience levels were not statistically significant, Welch's  $p = .692$ . Therefore, the ability to uphold NELP Standards did not appear to rest on a principal's years of experience.

Moreover, we analyzed whether levels of NELP preparedness differed based on the time spent since the principal completed the program. A one-way ANOVA compared principals who completed 1-5 years ago ( $n = 26$ ,  $M = 3.33$ ,  $SD = .50$ ), 6-10 years ( $n = 28$ ,  $M = 3.55$ ,  $SD = .39$ ), and 11 or more years ( $n = 19$ ,  $M = 3.42$ ,  $SD = .43$ ). The homogeneity of variance assumption was met, as the Levene's statistic was not significant,  $F(2,70) = .50$ ,  $p = .608$ . The results of the one-way ANOVA were not significant,  $p = .177$ . This finding suggested that perceived NELP competence was similar regardless of the time passed since the principal completed the program.

Using a one-way ANOVA, we also explored how perceived NELP preparation might be influenced by the locality of the school. Reflected in our sample were 28 rural schools ( $M = 3.31$ ,  $SD = .35$ ), 17 suburban schools ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = .45$ ), 14 urban schools ( $M = 3.47$ ,  $SD = .56$ ), and 14 schools in small towns ( $M = 3.53$ ,  $SD = .46$ ). The homogeneity of variance assumption was met, Levene's  $F(3,69) = 1.38$ ,  $p = .258$ . Although there were slight differences in NELP preparedness scores (i.e., rural schools had slightly lower scores than others), this difference was not statistically significant,  $p = .286$ . This finding suggested that the program resulted in similar perceived preparedness in upholding NELP Standards across different school localities.

Another potential relationship we were interested in investigating was whether principals working in schools with higher levels of poverty (as measured by percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced meals) differed in their perceived NELP competencies. Free or reduced meal percentages were collapsed into two relatively equal groups: 0-40% ( $n = 32$ ,  $M = 3.47$ ,  $SD = .51$ ) and 41-100% ( $n = 41$ ,  $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = .39$ ). An independent samples  $t$ -test was conducted and results were not significant,  $p = .525$ , suggesting that principals' perceptions of their preparation did not differ across schools with varying percentages of students in poverty.

Lastly, we were interested in analyzing differences in NELP grand means across schools with varying numbers of minority students. However, the unequal dispersion of minority students made direct comparisons difficult. We compared schools with 20% or less minority students ( $n = 49$ ,  $M = 3.41$ ,  $SD = .42$ ) and schools with more than 20% minority students ( $n = 24$ ,  $M = 3.50$ ,  $SD = .49$ ) using an independent samples  $t$ -test. The result was not significant,  $p = .406$ .

### ***NELP Standards 1-7 Compared to Grand NELP Mean***

Next, we wanted compare the individual NELP Standard 1-7 means to the grand mean of NELP scores ( $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = .45$ ) to identify areas in which principals felt most prepared. Each NELP Standard mean was compared to the overall grand mean using a paired-samples  $t$ -test. Out of the seven comparisons, two relationships were statistically significant. The mean preparedness of Standard 2 ( $M = 3.62$ ,  $SD = .49$ ) was significantly higher than the grand mean ( $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = .45$ ),  $t(72) = 3.69$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .43$ , suggesting that principals felt very well prepared in their "capacity to lead ethical and legal decision-making and to model professional norms." Also, the comparison of Standard 6 ( $M = 3.59$ ,  $SD = .62$ ) to the grand mean ( $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = .45$ ) revealed that principals felt significantly more confident in Standard 6 when compared to the overall NELP grand mean,  $t(72) = 2.86$ ,  $p = .006$ ,  $d = .33$ . This finding indicated that principals felt especially well-prepared in their "capacity to effectively manage daily school operations." The remaining five NELP standards did not differ significantly from the grand mean.

## Qualitative Findings - NELP Standards

Principals were asked, “Based on my experiences as a graduate, Ball State University candidates could be better prepared in the following areas. . .” Thirty-three principal alumni provided a response. Open or axial coding (Saldaña, 2009) was used to analyze the responses with NVIVO software. Four major codes emerged as suggested areas for improvement, which included *curriculum and instructional leadership, overseeing counselors and counseling programs, managing legal issues effectively, and promoting social justice as an inclusive leader.*

Next, the major codes were connected to the NELP Standards they related to, where applicable. The Standards that emerged as considerations based on the number of references to concepts are represented in Figure 1 and indicate areas of suggested program improvement.

**Figure 1**  
*Alignment of Open-Ended Responses to NELP Standards*

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Number of References</b>	<b>Exemplar</b>
NELP Standard 2: Ethics and Professional Norms	7	“Being prepared for legal aspects of the job that you inherit is something I wish I would've had some exposure to in the coursework. It's tough in those waters. I'm not sure anything can be done to prepare for that...”
NELP Standard 3: Equity and Inclusiveness	6	“Having more powerful racial equity training and how we can address the issue with parents and students. Giving us some practice for these difficult conversations would be helpful.”
NELP Standard 4: Learning and Instruction	5	... “curriculum development and scheduling. There need to be a focus on the development of curriculum and everything associated with it. Also, a training on how to develop a schedule of classes would be helpful.”
NELP Standard 7: Building Capacity	5	... “and the ability to build and support the growth of teachers.”
Principal-School Counselor Relationships	8	“I didn't hear much about school counseling during my principalship programming. You are probably doing more now on talking about what excellent school counseling programming is and what it should be.”
Fiscal/School Finance	4	“Building Finances (building projects) and all the things that are incorporated with issues like that.”
Special Education	5	... “special education (IEP's and 504's)” ...

As can be seen in Figure 1, suggested areas for improvement were most frequently noted for NELP Standards 2, 3, 4, and 7. For Standard 2, candidates described that the legal aspects of the job was something they wished they had more preparation in. One said, “being prepared for legal aspects of the job that you inherit is something I wish I would've had some exposure to in the coursework.” Others wanted more preparation in specific laws (e.g., charter school laws, special education laws). However, one candidate shared that the program would benefit by “skipping all of the law junk that [they] can look up on [their] own.” Though worded oddly, this statement suggested the principal felt that legal issues addressed were thorough, which seemed to align with the higher mean found in the quantitative analyses for Standard 2.

Moreover, some respondents mentioned issues that related to Standard 3, which addresses the principal's ability to “maintain a supportive, equitable, culturally responsive, and inclusive school culture.”

A number of these statements referred specifically to racial equity. For example, one candidate stated that, “having more powerful racial equity training and how we can address the issue with parents and students [would be beneficial].” The sixth response relating to this standard stated that more information regarding “school culture, social emotional learning, and trauma informed care” would be beneficial for program participants.

Next, several respondents suggested areas for improvement regarding Standard 4, which relates to the implementation and evaluation of curriculum and instruction. One response related to curriculum development, “There need[s] to be a focus on the development of curriculum and everything associated with it.” Another response simply stated, “Instructional leadership.”

Finally, Standard 7 describes an educational leader’s ability to support the growth of those employed by the school. A few suggestions in this category referred to leading professional development, while others related to improved preparation in the evaluation of teachers.

**Additional Suggestions.** Suggestions for improvement also addressed areas that are not directly assessed by NELP Standards, for example, *school counseling* and *special education*. It is important to note that many of the suggested areas for improvement were phenomenon assessed outside of NELP Standards, suggesting that greater preparation in the area of NELP Standards were actually not a main priority in candidates. Several of these suggestions related directly to working with school counselors. One candidate who participated in the program between 11-15 years ago shared that they “didn’t hear much about school counseling during my principalship programming. You are probably doing more now on talking about what excellent school counseling programming is and what it should be.” Moreover, issues related to special education (e.g., developing/monitoring IEP’s, 504’s) were brought up by some principals.

Even though the open-ended survey question elicited responses that were suggestions for program improvement, some participants instead provided positive or neutral responses. One respondent indicated, “I also appreciate the manner in which the program allowed for us to work with real world problems. The online program was extremely hands on.” Another stated, “The program was excellent. Thank you for it.” Another respondent shared their confidence in the program’s model of continuous improvement, saying, “I graduated from Ball State University’s building-level school leadership several years ago and the challenges administrators face today are greater than when I received my training. I am confident Ball State University is always evaluating (hence this survey) and meeting the needs of their students.”

**Time Lapse Considerations.** As mentioned previously, we gathered information on the number of years that had elapsed since the principal completed the program. Most principals completed between 6-10 years ago (38.4%), 3-5 years ago (30.1%), or 11-15 years ago (23.3%), with four (5.48%) completing 1-2 years ago. Connecting suggested areas for improvement to the time elapsed since completion of the program was an important, informative piece to our analysis, as many changes have been made to the program in recent years following other evaluation efforts. For example, all mentions of working with school counselors (a major code) were from principals who graduated three or more years ago. Notably, shifts in the curriculum with efforts to better prepare principals in this area occurred in 2018. Thus, concern about working with school counselors occurred prior to integrating school counseling information into the program. Although further assessments are needed, these findings suggested that graduates’ abilities to work with school counselors may have improved following recent curricula changes.

## Research Question 2: Superintendent Survey

Our second research question addressed the question of whether superintendents felt that recently hired principals who had completed our principal preparation program were well-prepared for their leadership roles within schools, particularly in upholding NELP Standards.

### *Quantitative Findings – Superintendents*

Superintendents were asked whether they felt our program graduates hired within the last three years were well-prepared in NELP Standards 1-7. Table 2 portrays these results.

**Table 2**

*Superintendent Responses Regarding Principals Hired Recently that were our Graduates.*

Survey Item:	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Strongly Agree <i>n</i> (%)	Agree <i>n</i> (%)	Disagree <i>n</i> (%)	Strongly Disagree <i>n</i> (%)
Program graduates hired as principals in the last three years were well-prepared in their capacity to lead in...							
NELP Standard 1	38	3.42	0.64	18 (47.4%)	19 (50%)	0	1 (2.6%)
NELP Standard 2	37	3.46	0.65	19 (51.4%)	17 (45.9%)	0	1 (2.7%)
NELP Standard 3	36	3.53	0.51	19 (52.8%)	17 (47.2%)	0	0
NELP Standard 4	37	3.32	0.67	15 (40.5%)	20 (54.1%)	1 (2.7%)	1 (2.7%)
NELP Standard 5	36	3.31	0.62	14 (38.9%)	19 (52.8%)	3 (8.3%)	0
NELP Standard 6	37	3.51	0.51	18 (48.6%)	19 (51.4%)	0	0
NELP Standard 7	38	3.34	0.59	15 (39.5%)	21 (55.3%)	2 (5.3%)	0

*Note.* Likert-Type Scale: 4=Strongly Agree, 3=Agree, 2=Disagree, 1=Strongly Disagree

As with the principal respondents, we were interested in analyzing superintendents' demographic factors in relation to NELP ratings. However, after conducting these analyses, no significant differences were revealed across demographics, which included the number of years the respondent had been a superintendent, district locality, district size, percentage of minority students, or percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced meals,  $ps > .05$ .

### *NELP Standards 1-7 Compared to Grand NELP Mean*

A grand mean of all NELP Standard 1-7 scores was calculated,  $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = .46$ . This mean fell between strongly agree and agree, suggesting that overall superintendents perceived our graduates to be well-prepared per the NELP Standards. Alike the analysis completed with principals, we were interested in comparing each Standards 1-7 mean to the grand mean. Individual standard means ranged from  $M = 3.31$  to  $M = 3.53$ . Paired samples  $t$ -tests were run to test whether individual means differed from the grand mean, but unlike the principal survey, none of the tests were significant,  $ps > .05$ . This indicated that the grand mean (3.40) was a good indicator of program graduates' overall NELP preparedness based on superintendents' ratings.

### **Qualitative Findings – Superintendents**

On the survey, an open-ended item asked superintendents to provide suggestions regarding areas in which our principal graduates could be better prepared. There were only 10 narrative comments and three of these responses were not suggestions but were positive comments towards graduates of the program. One superintendent stated, “We always hire the person prior to considering the university they attend but always know that Ball State University students are well prepared. We appreciate Ball State University and the job that is done preparing the graduates.” Another stated, “I really cannot think of any [areas for improvement]. All of the administrators I have worked with who trained at Ball State University are top notch.”

Several superintendents did note areas in which they believed candidates could be better prepared and four of these comments had to do with communication and discussion, which was the only theme that emerged. One said, “Younger principals need to have a better understanding of how to communicate effectively. Understanding how to efficiently and effectively handle stressful conversations with stakeholders and personnel.” Next, a superintendent indicated that candidates would benefit from greater proficiency in public and media relations. Lastly, a superintendent stated that principals should be better prepared at “observing, navigating, and managing the dynamics of mandatory subjects of discussion,” which is referring to our state’s teacher association’s contract negotiation and discussion process.

### **Comparison: Principal to Superintendent Ratings**

In this study, principals that graduated from the principal preparation program ( $n = 74$ ) were asked to self-report their perceived NELP preparation resulting from the program. To gain another perspective, superintendents who have worked with recent graduates ( $n = 38$ ) were asked to rate the program graduates on their capacity to uphold NELP Standards. Independent samples  $t$ -tests were conducted to compare NELP Standards 1-7 ratings from principals and superintendents. Each of these tests were insignificant,  $ps > .05$ , demonstrating that average ratings of NELP preparedness were similar. Furthermore, comparing the grand means of the ratings of the principals ( $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = .45$ ) and superintendents ( $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = .46$ ) using an independent samples  $t$ -test made sense to address whether NELP ratings differed when considering standards 1-7 altogether. The  $t$ -test indicated there was no significant difference in grand NELP means amongst principals’ and superintendents’ ratings,  $t(62.05) = .29$ ,  $p = .771$ . Both means resting between “strongly agree” and “agree,” suggested that principals from the program felt adequately prepared per the NELP Standards and superintendents concurred.

### **Discussion**

An administrator’s ability to uphold NELP Standards in practice is crucial to positive school outcomes (Young et al., 2018). Several demographic factors (e.g., experience, locality) were considered in addressing the question of whether perceived NELP Standards preparation differed across variables. Our analyses did not yield significant results, suggesting that the principal preparation program was successful for a wide-variety of settings and circumstances. It was encouraging to note that all principal respondents indicated that they were well prepared to promote NELP Standards and would recommend the program to others. Digging deeper, the qualitative data supplemented the quantitative data by demonstrating that although respondents felt the program well prepared candidates, there were several areas for suggested improvements. The next section is divided by each NELP Standard to paint an overall picture of the findings.

### **NELP Standard 1**

The first NELP Standard addresses whether an educational leader can “lead and successfully implement a school’s mission, vision, and school improvement plan.” Ratings by principals and superintendents were high in this area (both  $M = 3.42$ ), and qualitative statements did not seem to directly address a need for better preparation in this area.

### **NELP Standard 2**

NELP Standard 2 addresses abilities in leading ethical and legal decision-making and modeling professional norms. As noted by the paired samples  $t$ -test, it was discovered that principals felt especially prepared in this area as principals reported preparedness significantly higher than the grand mean ( $M = 3.62$  vs  $M = 3.44$ ). However, as seen in the open-ended piece of the survey, some principals mentioned specific legal issues that they wished they were more prepared on (e.g., special education law, charter school law), which are topical areas for consideration as additions in future revisions to our school law course.

### **NELP Standard 3**

NELP Standard 3 refers to the principal’s capacity “to develop and maintain a supportive, equitable, culturally responsive, and inclusive school culture.” Program alumni felt overall prepared in this area ( $M = 3.39$ ). Superintendents rated principals from the program highly in this area as well ( $M = 3.53$ ). Despite their perceptions of capacity with this standard, several respondents shared suggestions related to this standard (i.e., inclusive school culture, racial equity). In recent years, several program changes have been made in this area, which will be discussed in the “Limitation” section. Nevertheless, upon reviewing the qualitative responses, program faculty members believe that the principal preparation program could benefit from heightened attention on school leadership training for social justice, inclusivity, equity, and cultural responsiveness. This is a targeted area for ongoing program improvement. For example, all department faculty members recently completed a book study of Verschelden’s (2021) book *Bandwidth Recover for Schools*, and have been discussing and sharing with program candidates implementation ideas for school leaders to help P-12 students regain cognitive resources depleted from marginalization, trauma, and poverty.

### **NELP Standard 4**

Standard 4 handles capacity to evaluate and improve curriculum and instruction. Of principal respondents, 93% ( $n = 67$ ) reported they were prepared and 94.6% ( $n = 35$ ) of superintendents rated principals as prepared in this standard. These results indicated the program was successful in this area for most candidates. Regardless, a need for increased preparation in evaluation and curriculum development were mentioned in narrative comments. In order to further develop graduates’ capacity, moving forward, program faculty intend to ensure that evaluating and improving curriculum and instruction are areas of increased focus and practice.

## **NELP Standard 5**

Standard 5 addresses whether principals are “well prepared in their capacity to engage families and the community to support student learning.” Most principals (95.8%) self-reported high confidence in this area and their responses to the qualitative portion of the survey were not centered on this standard. However, issues related to this standard were cited qualitatively as an area for growth by superintendents. These centered around effective communication and handling public relations, which are areas that could be given increased attention during the two-semester internship experience, which culminates candidates’ principal preparation programs.

## **NELP Standard 6**

Standard 6 addresses capabilities in effectively managing daily school operations. Our analysis showed that principals’ mean for Standard 6 ( $M = 3.59$ ) was significantly higher than the grand mean ( $M = 3.44$ ), suggesting they felt exceptionally well prepared in this area. Seventy out of 73 principals (95.9%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were prepared in their capacity to uphold this standard, and all superintendents agreed or strongly agreed ( $M = 3.51$ ) that our graduates were well-prepared in this area. The qualitative responses supported these findings.

## **NELP Standard 7**

The ability “to build and support the professional learning and growth of teachers and staff” is addressed in Standard 7. A high majority of principals (94.6%) and superintendents (94.8%) agreed that the program well prepared graduates in this area. But, several principals suggested that they could benefit from more education on topics related to this standard. As an example, some principals shared that they would benefit from more preparation in teacher evaluation, supporting teacher growth, and leading professional development. Thus, we feel the preparation program would benefit from increased emphasis on best practices for supporting teachers and methods of providing effective professional development. For example, instructing future principals on how to organize and facilitate Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) within their schools is an important topic to be included in the program moving forward.

## **Limitations**

Although careful measures were made to ensure the usefulness and accuracy of the data at hand, this study was not without limitations. One of these limitations was a fairly small sample size (principals  $n = 74$ ; superintendents  $n = 38$ ). Also, our principal survey only captured principal alumni currently listed in our state’s school directory. Therefore, we likely missed some principal alumni and we also missed those alumni serving in other school leadership roles, for example, as vice or assistant principals, deans of students, or serving in directors’ positions.

Furthermore, many of the narrative responses on the qualitative portion of the survey, which asked for areas in which program graduates could be better prepared, tended to focus on prior areas that have since been addressed by the department. For example, the course on supervision and evaluation of teachers had been taught for years by a different department at our university. Based on consistently negative feedback from past students, the course was returned to the Educational Leadership Department in 2019, and we are now providing rigorous standards-based content and practice in this area. Therefore,



we believe our program candidates are receiving improved leadership-explicit instruction in supervision and evaluation since 2019.

In 2018, our department received a grant from Lilly Foundation, Inc. to revise our principal preparation program to better prepare principals to collaborate with school counselors to create successful comprehensive school counseling programs in their schools (Boyland et al., 2019; Geesa et al., 2020; Lowery et al., 2018). In addition, we recognized the need to embed more social justice and culturally responsive practices content in our principal preparation program. We began revising all core course content to include culturally responsive practices and principal-school counselor collaboration information in 2018. Also, we adopted a “core reader,” *Leadership for Increasingly Diverse Schools* (Theoharis et al., 2015; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2020). We have integrated several chapters into each core course throughout the program so that by the end of the program, all candidates have read and discussed the entire book. This core reader guides candidates in discussions about a variety of social justice topics. However, candidates who graduated from our preparation program before 2018 would be unaware of these curricular additions and changes.

In regard to curriculum development, we have recognized a need for educational leaders to gain skills, knowledge, and competencies in ways to foster interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary learning experiences. Based on research, we identified nine domains of leadership development to promote STEM-literacy and college and career readiness (e.g., equity and inclusion, professional learning, extended learning) (Geesa et al., 2021; Geesa et al., 2022a; Geesa et al., 2022b). Then, faculty created a graduate-level course related to these domains titled “Integrative STEM Education: Principals and Pedagogy” that is now a core option for students in the principal preparation program. This course began in Summer 2019 and runs each semester. Nevertheless, candidates who completed the program before 2019 would be unaware of this course offering.

### **Implications for Practice**

Overall, our survey results revealed that the principal preparation program at Ball State University was effective in preparing candidates per the NELP Standards. Quantitatively, both program graduates and superintendents reported high levels of preparation in abilities to uphold the standards. Qualitative responses revealed substantive suggestions, but upon considering the timeline of program completion and recent changes that had already been made to the program, we were able to validate the notion that some areas for improvement from earlier graduates were not shared by more recent graduates. Nevertheless, we have several areas to consider and work on based on respondents' suggestions.

In sum, while we were pleased with the overall findings that indicated our program was preparing principals well in their capacities per the NELP Standards, there were some important areas for additional attention and program improvements that were highlighted by this study and outlined in the Discussion section. We look forward to working towards these improvements and continuing in our efforts to prepare highly effective school leaders. We realize the seriousness of this role as principals are in key positions to shape supportive school cultures, improve learning opportunities for all students, advocate for marginalized youth, and even influence state and district policies (Khalifa et al., 2016; Sergiovanni, 2009). But, new principals will have difficulty meeting these goals if they are not well-prepared for the demands of the position. In recent years we have gained a much deeper understanding of the importance of high quality school leadership training (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Ni et al., 2019; Young & Crow, 2016), and the value of essential research-based expectations for principal preparation, as found in the NELP Standards (Young et al., 2018). The NELP Building-Level Administrative Standards can be used to facilitate bridging experiences between theory, research, and best practices in school leadership (NPBEA, 2018).

It has been asserted that some principal preparation programs focus too much on theory and not enough on practical application (Guerra et al., 2017), that some programs do not provide the rigorous standard-based learning experiences necessary for effective preparation (Grissom et al., 2019; Perrone & Tucker, 2019), and that some programs are disconnected with the current context of school leadership and the many societal changes reflected in schools (Kemp-Graham, 2015; Mendels, 2016). In order to prepare leaders for today's highly complex school environments, it is critical that faculty members and others who are responsible for preparing principals evaluate their programs, be open to change, and strive for continuous improvement. We realize that high quality principal preparation promotes effective leadership practices, like strong instructional leadership, which makes a measurable positive difference in student achievement and school success (Augustine-Shaw & Reilly, 2017; Drummond, 2019; Grissom et al., 2015; Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2010). We want our graduates to be "difference-makers" for their schools and communities and we also want them to be lifelong learners who are open to change and strive for continuous improvement. Faculty members should model continuous improvement for their program candidates.

Therefore, an important implication for practice is the need for universities with principal preparation programs to conduct assessments of the effectiveness of their programs both during and after program completion, and then use these results to drive program improvements. Although candidates are typically asked to evaluate courses and instructors during their programs, soliciting graduates' feedback after they have left the university and are working in the field is highly valuable because it provides evaluative data from a practitioner's lens.

In addition, assessing educator preparation programs in alignment with professionally-endorsed and research-based standards is crucial. The examination of program strengths and weaknesses from a nationally validated framework ensures programmatic content objectivity. Furthermore, doing such a study becomes a forcing function to examine whether all of the standards are included in the existing program and with fidelity. A continuous improvement cycle requires regular evaluations such as the one found in this study and program candidates deserve our ongoing attention to providing the highest quality preparation.

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# Preparing Administrative Leaders to Support Special Education Programs in Schools: A Comprehensive Multi-dimensional Model

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the International Council of Professors of Educational Leadership (ICPEL) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



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Professional standards for principals include numerous provisions addressing the need to have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to promote effective special education programs. The administration of special education programs requires complex responsibilities including assurances that policies and practices are in compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Administrators report that oversight of special education programs is among their most prioritized responsibilities yet was the area for which they were least prepared. This paper discusses coursework linked to professional standards and special education content, selected student assessment products, and qualitative data from program graduates. Several implications are identified.

**Editor's Note:** Occasionally, we publish articles in the International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation that are not reports of empirical research but rather offer some other benefit to the field. This is one such article. The authors' description of a leadership preparation program model that emphasizes enhanced preparation for leadership in the area of special education was deemed of value to share with the field and we are pleased to include it in this issue.

Principals are to be involved in all aspects of the school environment, including the administration of special education programs. Clearly, the professional standards for educational leaders include numerous provisions addressing the need for administrators to have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to promote effective special education programs within their schools. Attention to the achievement of students of color, students from low-income families, students with special educational needs, and English learners has brought focus to learning gaps among students. As the recent Wallace Foundation's (2021) report reminds us, "this attention has heightened the focus in school leadership on equity and cultural responsiveness, reflected in the prominence of these topics in the recently adopted Professional Standards for Educational Leaders" (Grissom et al., 2021, p. 2). These recently developed Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) require administrators to (a) place children at the center of education and accept responsibility for each student's academic success and well-being (Standard 2 Ethical and Professional Norms); (b) ensure that each student has equitable access to effective teachers, learning opportunities, academic and social support, and other resources necessary for success (Standard 3 Equity and Cultural Responsiveness); (c) confront and alter institutional biases of student marginalization, deficit-based schooling, and low expectations associated with race, class, culture and language, gender and sexual orientation, and disability or special status (Standard 3 Equity and Cultural Responsiveness); and (d) know, comply with, and help the school community understand local, state, and federal laws, rights, policies, and regulations so as to promote student success (Standard 9 Operations and Management) (National Policy Board for Educational Administration [NPBEA], 2015). It should also be noted here that while the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Program Recognition Standards (NPBEA, 2018) are often used by institutions of higher education undergoing accreditation, this study is more suited to a PSEL alignment as we discuss readiness levels of practicing administrators; for which PSEL standards are more commonly utilized. These standards provide a focus on equity and should guide school administrators in the oversight of special education programs in their schools. Yet the successful administration of special education programs requires multiple, complex responsibilities.

### **Special Education Administrative Responsibilities**

As the representative of the local education agency (LEA), building leaders must assure that policies and practices are in compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), as well as federal and state regulations. Many district-level leaders also share these responsibilities. These legal provisions include identifying those students who have a disability and need special education [20 U.S.C. § 1412(a)(3)] through an eligibility process aligned with IDEA evaluation requirements [20 U.S.C. § 1414(a-c)]. Once identified, LEA leaders must provide a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) to eligible children [20 U.S.C. § 1412(a)(1)], which requires assurances that students with disabilities receive educational benefit from their educational programs. The child's educational program is memorialized in an Individual Education Program (IEP) [20 U.S.C. § 1414(d)(1)(A)] which must be developed by a properly constituted IEP team [20 U.S.C. § 14(d)(1)(B)] and implemented by highly qualified teachers [20 U.S.C. § 1412(a)(14)(C)]. The child's IEP must be delivered in the least restrictive environment (LRE) [20 U.S.C. § 1412(a)(5)] with preference in general education rather than separate classes or programs. As a required IEP team member, the building administrator must be qualified to provide, or supervise the provision of specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of children with disabilities, knowledgeable about the general education curriculum, and knowledgeable about the availability of resources of the local educational agency [20 U.S.C. § 1414(d)(1)(B)(iv)]. The administrator must guarantee that parents and children are afforded numerous procedural safeguards [20 U.S.C. § 1415(b)]. The administrator must

know the disciplinary provisions, which involve limits on the number of days an eligible child may be suspended or expelled and requirements for conducting a manifestation determination [20 U.S.C. § 1415(k)]. The LEA must assure that building policies, procedures and programs are consistent with state policies addressing funding, service provision, and personnel [20 U.S.C. § 1413(a)].

Administrators must collect and report data for required State Performance Plans (SPP) and Annual Performance Report (APR) for indicators including graduation rates, dropout rates, student participation and performance on statewide assessments data, suspension and expulsion data, LRE data, identification data including possible disproportionality statistics, parental involvement data, child find data, transition data, and dispute resolution data [20 U.S.C. § 1415(b)]. The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) uses the information from the SPP/APR to annually determine if the state meets the requirements and purposes of the IDEA.

In addition to the administrator's required duties, research suggests that administrative support is important in cultivating effective special educators and establishing effective problem-solving teams (Fowler et al., 2019; Bettini et al., 2017). Principals must provide teachers with access to professional development and resources to address the needs of students with disabilities (Stelitano et al., 2019), including behavior and discipline issues (McIntosh et al., 2014). Strong administrative support is critical to successful inclusive practices (Melloy et al., 2021; Shogren et al., 2015) and to assure high-quality access to general education contexts for students with disabilities (DeMatthews et al., 2019). The administrative climate of the school cultivates culturally responsive practices and policies that address the needs of all students (Barakat et al., 2019; Minkos et al., 2017). Principals spend considerable time addressing special education issues, and must adopt several key roles such as visionaries, partners, coaches, conflict resolvers, and advocates to deliver effective programs (Cobb, 2015).

### **The Problem: Perceived Lack of Preparedness**

Given the complexities of successfully administering special education programs, administrative preparation programs must provide prospective educational leaders with the skills, knowledge, and dispositions to effectively support those programs. Yet, the large majority of current administrators report a lack of preparedness to meet their duties and responsibilities for special education. The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP, 2021) highlighted the important role of principals in promoting inclusive and effective special education services and noted that most school leaders have limited experiences with teachers and students with disabilities as part of their administrative preparation programs. The report cited a Rand survey of more than 3,500 principals which found that only 12 percent felt adequately prepared to support the needs of students with disabilities. Only eight states require principals to receive specific special education training in preparation programs, with most of the coursework focused on legal requirements (Billingsley et al., 2017), leaving principals ill-prepared "to address the needs of students with disabilities and others who struggle in school" (p. 7).

Administrators report that oversight of special education programs is among their most prioritized responsibilities, yet was the area for which they were least prepared (Petzko, 2008). Some administrators report "no special education training in their principal preparation programs" (Christensen et al., 2013, p. 104) and others exited their preparation programs "unprepared or only somewhat prepared to facilitate inclusive schedules, collect data for special education, oversee curriculum and alternative assessments for students with disabilities, participate with parents in IEP meetings, and address behavioral issues" (Schaaf et al., 2015, p. 178). Few school leaders are prepared to provide effective leadership for their special education programs, and most were not provided sufficient knowledge and field experiences in special education (Sun & Xin, 2019). According to a review by Anderson et al. (2018), institutions affiliated with the University Council of Educational Administration included four general content areas in the curricula



for administrator preparation which include (a) instructional leadership; (b) school improvement; (c) family and community relations; and (d) management - none of which included specific content related to special education. The competencies required for the administration of special education programs have been a long-neglected area within university-based administrator preparation programs (Pazey & Cole, 2013). Research has confirmed the lack of explicit attention to instruction regarding special education in administrator preparation programs (Melloy, 2018; Melloy et al., 2021; Schaaf et al., 2015). McHatton et al. (2010) found a “dissonance between what educational leadership preparation programs are providing future school administrators and their on-the-job demands” (p. 13). Zarelsky and colleagues (2008) similarly found preservice preparation inadequate and proposed that “critical issues and dilemmas of practice in special education be explicitly integrated into the curricular design of leadership preparation programs” (p. 173) through case studies and problem-based learning approaches, with rich opportunities for personal and professional reflection. Failure to provide adequate preparation during preservice education leaves administrators to rely on “on-the-job” training and in-service professional development, with costly consequences for school districts.

## **Litigation**

Principals hold the key to school level compliance with special education law and policies (Lashley, 2007). Indeed, “special education may be the most litigated educational law issue school leaders face” (Strader, 2007, p. 178). Administrators unprepared to comply with their special education legal responsibilities face significant liability when confronted with lawsuits resulting in substantial costs to their school districts (Pazey & Cole, 2013; Zirkel & Machin, 2012). School administrators are often uninformed or misinformed about special education law issues (Militello et al., 2009) and cannot guide their teachers in implementing legal requirements. Educational administration research and the high levels of litigation are indicative of the need to improve university-based administrator preparation programs.

## **Purpose and Conceptual Framework**

Given the importance of the successful administration of special education programs in PK-12 schools and the perceived lack of adequate preparation by school leaders, the purpose of this article was to present a comprehensive, multi-dimensional administrator preparation program designed with targeted and integrated special education leadership skills and competencies. The program of study should contain the key elements of effective, innovative educational leadership programs (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012), including standards-based curriculum, field-based internships, and active instructional approaches to link theory to practice. Importantly, to ensure that prospective administrators are prepared to provide effective leadership for their special education programs, the program must purposefully integrate additional elements addressing diversity and disability.

## **Instructional Content**

The content of the preparation program must include a deep understanding of disability, special education law and policy, current trends and research-based special education practices (Crockett, 2019; Bateman & Bateman, 2014). The content should be multidisciplinary (Pazey et al., 2012) and delivered by university faculty and practitioners with expertise and experience in special education. The content must be aligned with both NELP and PSEL standards for building-level administrators (NPBEA, 2018; NPBEA, 2015), and standards developed by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) for special education

administrators (CEC, 2009) for an integrated framework of inclusive social justice leadership (Pazey et al., 2012).

### **Field-based Practica & Internships**

The preparation program must also include the opportunity to apply course content in field-based practica or internships under the skilled supervision of mentors familiar with special education responsibilities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). The strong partnerships and collaboration between local school districts and the university-based program will provide authentic, meaningful, and practical experiences. Internship experiences must include specific experiences and exploration of diversity issues (Figueiredo-Brown et al., 2015) so that prospective principals are prepared to lead inclusive school communities.

### **Student Learning Outcomes and External Validation**

The comprehensive preparation program should also clearly identify student learning outcomes and plans to assess those outcomes, using both direct and indirect metrics (Mello, 2018). Student reflection of practica/internship experiences would arguably be one of the most important metrics. The content of the preparation program should be regularly validated by both external reviewers and by program advisory boards or councils. Advisory boards should guide curriculum development, ensure curriculum relevance, and assure meaningful involvement of the larger educational community in program delivery and support (Mello, 2019).

Importantly, specific competencies aligned with special education leadership must be integrated and infused throughout the entire preparation program. Rather than a single course addressing diversity and disability, the program of study must purposefully include content addressing diversity and disability in all aspects of the preparation requirements.

### **A Comprehensive, Multi-Dimensional Administrator Preparation Model**

We present the Educational Leadership Preparation Program at the University of A, which addresses the various dimensions described above. A description of the preparation program with the required coursework and practica is provided in Appendix A. We provide specific examples of the content linked to professional standards, and the course and practica/internships requirements with emphasis on those explicitly addressing special education which are integrated throughout the preparation program. We present selected student products included in the learning outcomes assessment and include excerpts from course and internship reflections by students which address special education topics and issues. We also highlight the roles of the preservice supervising mentor and the inservice, first-year mentor in providing a seamless transition to the administrative profession. We conclude with a discussion of implications to further enhance the program's effectiveness.

### **Course and Internship Requirements: The Special Education Focus & Integration**

The infusion of special education leadership competencies within the principal preparation program at the University of A is delivered through three venues. First, students complete required coursework that addresses, both directly and indirectly, the administration of special education programming. Second, students are required to complete a minimum of fifty hours of internship specifically aligned to special education programming within their school and district. These hours are

individually determined, overseen by a mentor that is typically their building principal, and are followed up with student reflections. Both the specific role of the mentor, and examples of internship reflections are addressed in later sections. Finally, students are required to embed specific program-required internship activities above the minimum fifty hours outlined with their mentor.

Coursework is aligned with both the PSEL and NELP standards for building-level administrators (NPBEA, 2015; NPBEA, 2018) and the CEC standards for special education administrators (CEC, 2009) and content is integrated throughout the preparation program. Students are provided with a strong foundation in the Special Education Law & Policy course with specific expectations and assignments. Students have the opportunity to explore the multi-dimensional work of building leaders aligned with special education: eligibility determination, IEP meeting facilitation, parental partnerships and collaboration, school-based mental health supports (SBMHS), behavior and discipline requirements, transition services, service delivery and instructional models, multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), data collection for federal performance indicators, and dispute resolution options including mediation and due process. Case studies and problem-based learning approaches with rich opportunities for student reflection (Zarelsky et al., 2008) are featured in instructional delivery.

Various aspects of the Special Education Law & Policy course are highlighted and integrated with direct principal application in the course, School Governance & Law. While taking this course, students are involved with discussions and reflections surrounding special education programming that includes the principal's role as the local area education agency representative (LEA), the school's role in providing a free and appropriate public education (FAPE), the discipline of students with disabilities, legal challenges surrounding the least restrictive environment (LRE), and the impact of legal challenges and court decisions on serving entitled individuals. Cases law is explored to deepen student's understanding of legal issues and the subsequent impact on the delivery of special education services.

Special education content is integrated in the course Seminar in School Leadership, which provides additional insight to special education programming with required activities and reflections surrounding the complex world of special education finance in public schools. While school finance is a major part of the preparation program for students completing superintendent training, aspiring principals must understand funding streams that impact them directly at their building level. The need for the inclusion of training that involves the funding of special education programs was further strengthened in a study conducted by Christensen et al. (2013), where the researchers found over 95% of principal respondents indicated a "great/moderate importance" or "highest/very great importance" in the area of "knowledge of funding sources and other resources available for individuals with disabilities" (p. 100).

Another course in the University's principal preparation program that highlights an understudied aspect of preparation is the Evaluator Approval course, which provides specific licensure for the evaluation of teachers. One specific activity tasks students with mock observations and follow-up formative evaluations of two teachers. While the observation and follow-up evaluation of a special education teacher is not required, such integration is highly suggested by the instructor. In choosing this option, the students then often embark on the understanding of inherent differences between the evaluation of special education teachers as compared to that of general education teachers. "Look fors" might include aspects of progress monitoring, goal setting, goal progress and attainment, specially designed instruction, and oversight of general education teachers providing appropriate accommodations. Such integrated opportunity expands the teacher evaluation competencies to specifically address distinct evaluative considerations for special educators.

Beyond specific coursework, the second expectation found in the University's principal preparation program includes the completion of a minimum of 50 hours of embedded internship under the direction of a licensed administrator (mentor), and aligned to special education programming. These internship hours are planned in advance, as much as possible, and require the student to take on a

leadership focus within the special education arena. Through logged reflections following completed hours, students often include activities such as serving as the LEA in IEP meetings, facilitating grade level teams' appropriate accommodations for their students with disabilities, providing coordination of a school's Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), and the oversight of summer programming. The specific role and impact of the internship mentor is described in a later section.

The third expectation involving the infusion and integration of special education leadership within the principal preparation program at the University of A involves specific program-required internship activities. These activities, while overseen by the student's mentor, are required of all students, regardless of their local context. As a direct result of the programs most recent State Department of Education accreditation review, the principal program made extensive changes to their internship program requiring more program-required activities and fewer locally-designed activities: "the institution of a more structured set of field experiences for future school principals is centrally important to the entire program reform effort" (Nicks et al., 2018, p. 23). One example of an added program-required activity mandates that aspiring principals attend a regional or state conference. While it is not required that students select a conference centered on special education leadership, the vast majority of our students select a conference in this area due to their interest in the complexities of special education leadership. Further, while many students voluntarily chose to attend an IEP meeting, this program-required activity is now mandated for the purpose of the principal's role. The value of integrating a special education focus in the course, internship, and field-based competencies venues is evident in data aligned with the preparation program's student learning outcomes. We present selected student products and student reflections to illustrate how this integration enhances the preparation of future administrators.

### **Student Learning Outcomes and Selected Student Products**

To illustrate special education specific learner outcomes, we highlight the requirements of the Special Education Law and Policy course. Several course-level objectives are specified, including (a) identification of federal and state sources of legal authority; (b) discussion of the history of laws for children with disabilities and identify the purpose and the six provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA); (c) comparison of federal & state regulations promulgated under the IDEA; and (d) analysis of statutory law, federal and state regulations and current judicial interpretations for distinct requirements of the IDEA [evaluation and eligibility for services, provision of a free, appropriate public education (FAPE), Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) mandate, behavior and disciplinary provisions, specially-designed instruction (SDI) and related services, parental rights]. The student learning outcomes are aligned with both the PSEL standards for building-level administrators (NPBEA, 2015) and CEC standards for special education administrators (CEC, 2009). For example, learning outcome "a" above is aligned with the CEC standard SA1S1: "Interprets and applies current laws, regulations, and policies as they apply to the administration of services to individuals with exceptional learning needs and their families" as well as PSEL standard 9d: "Know, comply with, and help the school community understand local, state, and federal laws, rights, policies, and regulations."

To achieve these outcomes, students complete several case studies and project-based activities (Zarelsky et al., 2008) throughout the course. The case studies assignments include scenarios involving inclusion/LRE, a manifestation determination for disciplinary action, an eligibility determination for a student with academic deficits, instructional considerations for a student with autism, and transition planning for secondary students with disabilities. The project-based Side Bar assignments involve collecting district performance data for students with disabilities (e.g., suspension and expulsion statistics indicating disproportionality, results of student academic proficiency), critiquing district special education policies and practices (e.g., IEP meetings, components of 504 plans, paraprofessional services), and

interviewing and shadowing district special education personnel. Noteworthy reflections from the assignments included one student's awareness of how a principals' participation in IEP meetings is critical to a successful outcome: "The principal had no relationship with the (special education) student and was unfamiliar with the student or his behavior needs. At one point, the principal began to irritate the student with his suggestions causing the meeting to become tense." Another student reflected on possible predetermination involved in an IEP meeting and how his learning from the class would have changed his involvement as the educational leader: It did seem that the meeting was somewhat of a checklist. The goals and services moving forward seemed predetermined and parent participation was not really asked for. It was almost as if the parent was just told how everything was going and here is what is going to be put in place...I wish this would have looked more like an actual partnership. If I would have had the information we have been learning in class, I could have directed it a bit more in that direction. Another student, reviewing the data on suspensions and expulsions for his district, reflected on possible disproportionality: Students with IEP's and 504's represent just under 18% of the total population. However, they make up 55% of the total behavior referrals. At first, I was a bit surprised about these totals. After looking into the data a bit deeper it began to make more sense. If teachers are referring to the actions, students that have behavior IEPs should account for a higher total, and that somewhat justifies the need for the IEP. It gets a bit foggy when teachers give more chances to some students and not others. I often wonder if there is a way to get accurate data in all areas. The case study assignments and project-based reflections from the Special Education Law and Policy course provide prospective educational leaders with real-world examples of the IDEA law in practice. Through data and document analysis, interviews, observations, and self-reflection, these future leaders begin to develop the skills and dispositions to effectively supervise the special education programs in their schools.

### **Internship Reflections of Special Education Topics and Issues**

As students navigate the minimum 50 hours of required internship in special education leadership, their subsequent reflections around their work continue to document the need for this integration, and the likelihood that what is required may still not be enough to prepare them for the challenges inherent in the leadership of special education programming. One student documented how the understanding of special education law was vital for aspiring leaders: "Principals must be knowledgeable about IEP and SPED law to answer questions for parents as well as make sure that the IEP's are being followed. Schools can get into serious trouble if they are not following an IEP." While attending a recent conference on special education, one student's comments resonated strongly in support of increased exposure around special education finance: "This experience taught me much about a topic I had no previous knowledge of. I learned about the intricacies of school funding, special education reimbursement, and Medicaid funding." Another student, following his attendance at an IEP meeting, stated: "As an aspiring administrator you must stay up to date with special education protocols, laws, and best educational practice." Finally, one student's recent reflection outlines the importance of the preparation program's continued evaluation of their inclusion of special education leadership: "I'm starting to realize how important and time consuming special education can be. Administrators must be well versed and up to date with special education laws and regulations."

Embedded internships around special education leadership, followed by deep reflections highlighting students' key takeaways and learning, are a vital aspect of leadership preparation programs. As Gray et al. (2007) remind us, "built right, the internship becomes a sturdy vessel upon which new practitioners can navigate the swift, unpredictable currents that separate classroom theory and on-the-job reality" (p. 3). This movement from theory to practice is reinforced when students are required to reflect on their experience and growth. After all, "self-reflection is the key to learning. And learning is the

key to growing. If you are not making time for self-reflection, you are not making time for growth” (Matlock, 2017, para. 1). Research suggests that the opportunity to collaborate with an experienced administrative mentor enhances the value of these field-based experiences.

### ***The Role of Mentors***

The empirical literature consistently confirms the importance of mentoring in leadership development (Geer et al., 2014) and the mutual benefits of active, authentic partnerships with field-based experts for both student protege and mentors (Clayton et al., 2012). With an abundance of research highlighting how an internship’s effectiveness is related to the guidance provided by an on-site mentor (Gray et al., 2007; Wallace Foundation, 2007), we provide context on how this is accomplished in the University of A’s principal preparation program. The mentor-guided internship is aligned with a leadership coaching and mentoring model (Gray, 2018) to “prepare, support and sustain new school leaders in the field and profession” (p. 1). The model involves university faculty providing leadership-focused coaching during practica and internships, while partnering with school districts who provide mentoring support and experienced leaders as mentors. The faculty leadership coaches assist the novice in setting goals and improving leadership skills throughout the internship (Lochmiller, 2014) and provide professional development opportunities for the mentor principal leaders and field supervisors. According to program guidelines, mentors agree to guide candidates through program-required and field-based internships. These experiences should provide candidates with appropriate and genuine opportunities for leadership development. Mentors must be certified and practicing administrators, and the selection process is a shared endeavor between the candidate and faculty. While it is typical that on-site administrators practicing in the same building as the candidate are chosen, what is most important is that chosen mentors have the authority and ability to provide quality experiences that “open doors” for their aspiring leaders: “by improving the quality of mentoring and internship experiences, universities and districts can increase the ability of new school leaders to address real school problems before they leave the starting gate for their first principalship” (Gray et al., 2007, p. 11). This type of high quality partnership between the university and districts is pivotal as university-based courses stress the importance of creating a theory to practice experience and vital in assuring prospective administrators have authentic, genuine opportunities to study the special education contexts in schools.

In the University of A’s principal preparation program, mentors stay in consistent contact throughout the duration of the program with faculty field supervisors or “leadership coaches” (Gray, 2018). These faculty field supervisors are retired administrators with extensive knowledge and recent experience; crucial to assisting in the communication and oversight of each candidate’s internship plan. This consistent communication also provides additional resources for support and assists faculty in keeping coursework relevant and timely (i.e. theory to practice). Along with the communication and oversight, field supervisors work directly with mentors through the evaluation of the on-site candidates that occurs once per semester. These evaluations provide candidates with a consistent review of their progress, aligned with the expectations of the national standards, and they also pinpoint areas of experience that are lacking (Lochmiller, 2014). These conversations greatly assist the on-site mentor in better understanding opportunities that need to be uncovered. After all, “until [preparation programs] provide the resources and structures to ensure that every mentor has the ability and support to manage challenging experiences for interns in real-school situations, the value of the mentoring process to enhance leadership preparation - and ultimately to raise student achievement - is severely limited” (Gray et al., 2007, p. 12). Positive outcomes of mentoring to the protégé include increased professional opportunities, job satisfaction, and desirable career outcomes (Eby et al., 2008). Mentors give professional advice, help their less-experienced proteges solve complex work problems, and serve as

partners in processing situations and experiences (Grissom & Harrington, 2010). The complexities associated with special education program administration are particularly well-suited for mentor collaboration and guidance.

In the state where the University of A is located, once an administrative candidate completes their preparation program and is hired as a building administrator, their mentoring does not cease. Many new district administrators have few opportunities to learn alongside seasoned mentors in the field. Educational leaders must continue to learn on the job, but some may be working in isolated silos, miles away from colleagues who are able to identify with the work related challenges (Augustine-Shaw & Funk, 2013). First-year mentoring programs help new administrators “bridge the gap between what they enter their new leadership position knowing, and what they need to know in order to grow while on the job” (p. 19). First-year mentoring has been associated with positive benefits such as increased retention of educational leaders in schools, building leadership capacity through interaction with experienced mentors, enhancing reflection of the impact of decisions and actions, and increased confidence. Through the state’s School Administrators organization, one year of mentoring is required by state law for new principals upon accepting their first position. Mentoring training is required for both the mentor and mentee, as well as periodic statewide meetings, weekly check-ins, and monthly face-to-face meetings. The importance of a mentoring relationship both during an administrator preparation program as well as upon initial hire sends “strong messages that high-quality internships for aspiring principals are essential to prepare future school administrators who can lead teaching and learning improvement” (Gray et al., 2007, p. 22). Mentors play an important role in encouraging and supporting entrance and advancement in leadership.

### **Discussion and Implications**

Comprehensive and effective administrator preparation should include various dimensions, including coursework and content specific to special education. The preparation program must also include field-based practica or internships under the supervision of mentors familiar with special education responsibilities. The comprehensive preparation program should also clearly identify student learning outcomes associated with special education expertise and plans to assess those outcomes.

In presenting the University’s Administrator Preparation Program, four implications were identified. First, the Evaluator Approval class should require one of the mock observations and follow-up formative evaluations be conducted with a special education teacher. A study conducted by The National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality (TQ Center) (2010) found nearly one half of respondents believed that special education teachers should not be evaluated in the same manner as their general education counterparts and that absent a clear understanding of the special skills and instructional methods necessary for effective instruction of students with disabilities, the ability to distinguish between effective and ineffective instruction in these classrooms is quite limited. Principal preparation programs must incorporate the use of alternative evaluation systems for special education teachers with evaluation rubrics that include performance domains and metrics specific to teaching of students with disabilities.

One example of alternative evaluation models specifically aligned for special education teachers comes from Virginia Commonwealth University’s Autism Center for Excellence (2015), and could be utilized as an excellent guide for enhancing the Evaluator Approval course required in most principal preparation programs. One example involves the need to evaluate a teachers’ performance in the setting of appropriate goals for students with disabilities. One specific standard found within the Performance Standards Rubric for Special Education Teachers includes a category that states “Bases instruction on goals that reflect high expectations and are based on students’ IEPs” (VCU Autism Center for Excellence, 2015). Utilizing rubrics like this, that identify specific areas to look for when evaluating special education teachers,

can provide aspiring principals with the necessary tools that delineate the key differences between evaluating the quality of instruction provided by special education teachers as compared to general education teachers. Other standards include instructional planning, instructional delivery, assessment of and for student learning, learning environment, and professionalism.

Secondly, while most program evaluation models involve the solicitation of student feedback to improve the quality of their overall program, the model used in the Principal Preparation program at the University of A does not gather specific feedback around students' perceptions of their leadership preparation for special education programming. An end-of-program survey item addressing this question should be added.

Third, better utilization of the program's advisory councils is warranted. Intentional discussions specific to the necessary leadership skills for principals would provide social validity of the program content.

A final implication is the need to collect, utilize and embed the insightful and rich feedback from graduates now serving as principals within new preparation program requirements. Their voices also highlight the need to infuse additional resources and panel-type discussions that are specific to the leadership of special education programming. One limitation of the proposed preparation model involves differences in state-mandated accreditation. Since states vary in accreditation requirements, some suggestions and recommendations for improvements may not be applicable for national replication.

The successful administration of special education programs requires multiple, complex responsibilities. Research suggests that most administrators perceive a lack of preparedness to meet their duties and responsibilities for special education. The failure to adequately prepare prospective administrators in preservice preparation programs results in costly consequences for school districts, including increased administrative attrition, low career satisfaction, and litigation. The comprehensive, multi-dimensional university program may provide a model for assuring future LEA leaders have the knowledge and skills to effectively administer the special education programs in their schools and districts.



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## Appendix

### University of A Principal Preparation program

This two-year program is designed for persons seeking endorsement in the state as a PK-12 Principal/PK-12 Supervisor of Special Education. Students gain hands-on experience through an internship where work products and skills are developed.

This performance-based program is unique in that it minimizes student class time and maximizes on-site skill development while working with a mentor. Students entering this program are required to devote a considerable amount of time in an internship experience where work products and skills are developed.

Program Highlights include:

Program completion in 2 years — 35 units of graduate credit via 13 courses and extensive internship experiences

Program delivered one night per week during the fall and spring semesters via interactive video conferencing. The first summer session includes a 6-day on-campus experience. Coursework and some courses are offered entirely online using Blackboard, a learning management system.

Cohort delivery model — build a network and study with the same group of adult learners for the duration of the program

Students are provided a mentor, field supervisor, and an advisor to assist in successful and timely completion of the program.

Year 1	Year 2
Orientation to Leadership Standards (2 cr) School Mngmnt for Student Lrning (3 cr) Evaluator Approval (3 cr) Leading Lrning, Tchng & Curriculum (3 cr) Internship (1 cr) Leadership for Effective Schools (3 cr) Seminar: School Leadership (2 cr) School Governance & Law (3 cr)	Leading School Growth & Imprvmnt (2 cr) Educational Research (3 cr) Internship (1) Community Connections or Activities Admin (2 cr) Special Education Law & Policy (3 cr) Capstone in Educational Leadership (1 cr) Leading Instruction in Schools (3 cr)

The program consistently admits between 50-60 new students each fall semester

# Assistant Principals Reconsider “Normal” Following COVID-19

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the International Council of Professors of Educational Leadership (ICPEL) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



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*When COVID-19 changed schooling in Illinois from face-to-face teaching and learning to remote teaching and learning, the transformation was sudden and swift. While there may have been premonitions and feelings of urgency about the effects of the novel coronavirus, there was little time to plan for the change that would take place and little information to understand how this change would be implemented and monitored over the next several months. There was no gaining buy-in from faculty, parents, and students for the abrupt change. There was no professional development to prepare for the dramatic changes in delivery of instruction. There was no preparation to overcome the resistance that frequently accompanies organizational change. How this change was handled is of significance for the way schools move forward. What did they manage well? What did they learn from the changes? And how does dramatic change affect how schools move forward?*

COVID-19 disrupted lives around the world in 2020. For educators and students in Illinois schools, the disruption of prek-12 services began on Tuesday, March 17, as Governor Pritzker closed all Illinois schools, suspending in-person instruction through March 30, 2020 (Illinois State Board of Education, March 13, 2020). Subsequent gubernatorial executive orders kept schools closed, offering only remote instruction through June 29, 2020 (State of Illinois, May 29, 2020). During summer 2020, Illinois districts made plans for fall 2020 including online, in-person, and hybrid instruction (Illinois State Board of Education, July 23, 2020). As of April 10, 2021, the Illinois State Board of Education's Dashboard on District Instruction reported the number of districts offering Blended Remote Learning, 457; In-Person Learning, 409; and Remote Learning, 47 (Illinois State Board of Education, April 10, 2021). For the fall start of the 2021-2022 school year, Illinois schools were planning on prek-12 instruction being 'back-to-normal,' in-person instruction.

"In the rush to return to normal, use this time to consider which parts of normal are worth rushing back to" (Hollis, 2021).

In a previous qualitative study, a number of assistant principals participated in a survey, were interviewed, and were observed in their schools to determine the degree to which they were instructional leaders or disciplinarians (VanTuyle, 2018). Shortly after Illinois' suspension of in-person instruction was enacted, this question was raised, "What are your assistant principals doing?" The previous research results caused assumptions to surface in my mind. *"They aren't handling as many discipline problems. They aren't evaluating teachers in classrooms in brick-and-mortar schools."* In addition, it was apparent the various models and theories of organizational change APs had studied in their administrator preparation courses may not be useful, as this change was sudden, unplanned, and lacking stakeholder buy-in and pre-conceived outcomes. With this uncertainty, however, there were many important tasks APs around the state were handling. They were preparing lunches, delivering lunches, delivering possessions left at schools to students and faculty at home. They were managing school maintenance, solving technology issues, and supporting students and teachers transitioning to remote learning. They responded to an unplanned change with little time to consider outcomes of all they would be expected to do. They fulfilled a variety of responsibilities, of which many were new tasks. They were very busy.

The purpose of this qualitative study is threefold: to determine how the role, relationships, and responsibilities of APs have changed as in-person instruction was halted and then transitioned to a hybrid model; to determine what APs learned from any changes in their role, relationships, and responsibilities; and to consider the degree to which any change in practice was worth retaining for the benefit of enhancing school culture or student outcomes.

There is value in reviewing the outcomes of adjustments and adaptations undertaken by students, teachers, and administrators when in-person instruction was suspended and in examining how these outcomes affected the role of APs in particular. As well, it is important to consider what positive outcomes resulted from adapting to the radical change caused by COVID-19 and whether these changes should be maintained as APs advise on creating "a new normal" for their schools in the future. The research raises a question of whether to discard any new practice that is not aligned with "the way we have always done things," signifying a resistance to change or to accept the adopted changes as part of "a new normal."

### **Organizational Change**

Education in the United States has a long history of reform movements that have led to evolutionary organizational changes in schools. And this history of reforms is often embedded in many courses teachers and administrators take for professional licensure. Reforms in the last 150 years include examples like Horace Mann's common school reform, the Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, Public School System development resulting from the Industrial Revolution of the early 1900s,

Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Standards-based Education reform in the 1990s, No Child Left Behind, in early 2002s, and, most recently the very Student Succeeds Act.

Each of these national reform movements affected individual public schools, faculty and staff, students, parents, communities, and school administrators. Reform efforts like these do not lead to the expected outcomes without effective, administrative leadership at the school level (Fullan, 2000). Change does not occur without trusted relationships, a successful implementation of an organizational change, and on-going evaluation of progress. As a result, organizational change is a topic in many school administration preparation programs.

Among the earliest references to organizational development and change is the psychologist, Kurt Lewin (1947). Lewin's theory was based on recognizing "social happenings are both the result of, and the conditions for the occurrence of, physical events," and "...are characterized by *relations* between parts...". (p. 7). His model of change is expressed this way, "A successful change includes therefore three aspects: unfreezing (if necessary) the present level  $L^1$ , moving to the new level  $L^2$ , and freezing group life on the new level," (p. 35), which became the three-step process known as Unfreeze, Change, and Refreeze. The unfreezing step requires communication and collaboration among stakeholders to understand and become comfortable with the change. The change level requires leadership coaching and support as the change is established and refined. Refreeze requires adopting the change with fidelity to specific outcomes.

In the 1950s, as industry and mass production grew in the United States, W. Edwards Deming created a model for improving industrial practices to meet demands. The Deming Wheel had four stages, Plan, Do, Check, Act (Deming, 1950). Through several iterations of the Deming model over the next several years, the PDCA model continued to be focused on products and service. Yet, in the 1990s Deming Wheel's Check step was changed to Study (Moen & Norman, 2010). The PDSA wheel found a new use, in education as a continuous-improvement model, despite the fact there is no mention of the importance of personal, professional relationships in this model.

First-order change and second-order change were first defined by Watzlawich, et al. (1974). However, Marzano. et al. (2005) promoted understanding of these terms for school administrators, in their book *School Leadership that Works*:

First-order change is incremental. It can be thought of as the next most obvious step to take in a school or a district. Second-order change is anything but incremental. It involves dramatic departures from the expected, both in defining a given problem and in finding a solution (p. 66). The characterization of second-order change, as a dramatic departure from the expected, describes the change associated with the shift to remote learning at the outset of COVID-19. The authors cite four areas of responsibility leaders of schools must engage in to manage effectively a second-order change. These areas are cited with brief examples from the Marzano, Waters, and McNulty text. "Culture: ...work with small groups generating explicit ideas and connections.... Communication: ...Probe for questions and concern from colleagues.... Order: ...foster a sense of stability.... Input: ...Meet frequently with small groups to hear concerns and respond... (2005, p. 122). Their book provides insight into the importance of collaborative relationships in successful implementation of second-order change.

John Kotter's 1988 publication, *Leading Change*, was the blueprint for his eight-step model for change. In a subsequent publication in 2006, titled *Our Iceberg is Melting*, Kotter demonstrated the steps with a fictional story of a waddle of penguins faced with a challenging dilemma. Kotter's model includes these steps: (a) create a sense of urgency; (b) build a guiding coalition; (c) form a strategic vision and initiatives; (d) enlist a volunteer army; (e) enable action by removing barriers; (f) generate short-term wins; (g) sustain acceleration; and (h) institute change (Kotter, 1996). Curious Fred, Alice, and the Head Penguin strategically created relationships that led to a collaborative effort to solve their community's

problem. Kotter's book and the eight-step process for change continues to be cited as a popular source for understanding change management (Harrin, 2022).

These examples of research-based approaches to organizational change include planning for a change and deciding on specific actions to implement the change, and as well include the order and timing of these actions to accomplish the anticipated results. These change models are evolutionary, the gradual development of something. When Illinois schools suspended in-person instruction and began facilitating remote instruction, the change was revolutionary, a dramatic change. Organizational change at the onset of the pandemic has been described as "...incomplete maps without clear destinations" (Choflet, Packard, & Stashower, 2021, p. 4) or as "...impossible to effectively scenario plan, an invidious situation for any leader" (Amis & Janz, 2020, p. 273). The changes school administrators facilitated were norm-breaking. How did these changes impact the role of APs during COVID-19?

Organizational change in the COVID-19 environment has added nuance to some steps and emphasis to other steps in evolutionary change models. The importance of the nature of relationships in organizations cannot be discredited whether change is planned or evolutionary. Research on change during COVID-19 reflected how collaborative relationships helped support stakeholders through challenges associated with change.

Amis and Janz (2020) studied leadership challenges in response to COVID-19 and cited the importance of "a people-centered approach to change" (p. 273). They noted rapid organizational change can be successful in organizations with an established culture of trust, openness, and risk-taking. Leaders are successful when they engage stakeholders early in the crisis and encourage collaborative problem-solving relationships. Leadership is not seen as top-down, but as collaborative, viewing employees as idea generators needed to "harness the collective insight within the organization" (p. 273).

A group of Texas teachers in a post-graduate course contributed to an article sharing their thoughts about what worked and what didn't work in their schools from March through May of 2020 (Brelsford et al., 2020). Among the "what worked" items during these months, the teachers cited parent/administrator and teacher/administrator relationships. Teachers in schools whose administrators had established a positive relationship with parents before the COVID-19 crisis, continued to build upon this asset by checking on the students and families while managing change. Principals, who had previously been kept busy with discipline, were now spending more time helping and supporting students and families. Relationships between administrators and teachers also shifted. "The honesty and vulnerability that some principals were willing to show deepened the level of trust and respect between them and the teachers" (p. 18).

Martinez and Broemmel (2021) studied the effects of COVID-19 on teachers and their self-efficacy as they navigated COVID-19. The authors compared the preparation for and the management after a natural disaster (tornado, flood, and/or hurricane) to the response to COVID-19. They noted the importance of leadership adaptability, moral responsiveness, and recognizing the vulnerability of stakeholders. An important finding was "Participants attributed feelings of support to family and friends and collaboration with colleagues, attributions that were not evident in related research. It was clear that the educators in our study valued collaboration" (p. 28). In addition, the distribution of essential items, was an activity common among school employees responding to COVID-19 and when a natural disaster like a flood, tornado, or hurricane, ravages a school or community.

Six elementary teachers participated in a study conducted by Anderson and Hira (2020) investigating how teachers responded to moving from brick-and-mortar instruction to remote instruction early in the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers navigated the transition from in-person "by choosing to hone fewer formal learning goals..." and by "rethinking what counts as essential knowledge and skills" (p. 415). Accompanying the revision of instruction was the care and support teachers lent to students and their families. They created assignments that could be completed with materials students had access to. They



communicated consistently and supportively and in a variety of ways with students and families, not only throughout a typical school day, but at other times as well. The teachers responded with understanding and compassion to parent and guardian needs and concerns. The authors concluded their research by noting the care these teachers may need as they “are stretching themselves thin to do their best for students” (p. 417).

A reflective essay, written by O’Connell, (2020) a scholar, and Clarke (2020) a headmaster of a western Australia boarding school, suggested several effective practices they employed during COVID-19. Among them was “Identify and solve the pressing problems.” The authors note there is no perfect solution, and there is no time to gather more information. Decide based on the facts at hand and move on. “Be authentic” is noted as “revealing one’s vulnerability.” The author’s assert, “In crises, one’s demonstration of humanity counts for much in the eyes of those being led” (p. 7). “Be open” which “requires that one speaks up early and truthfully” and provides “psychological safety” to others. “Demonstrate empathy” is defined as giving “assurance that overall community welfare is paramount” (p. 8).

Ute Kaden (2020) conducted a single case study of a secondary school teacher’s transition to online instruction during spring 2020. Mr. Carl, a pseudonym, was an experienced, secondary math and science teacher at a small rural school in Alaska. As a veteran employee in his school, he was considered the Lead Teacher. The district in which he taught, had had a one-to-one technology program fully instituted. With the exception of delivering some print materials and hotspots to homes, students appeared to transition to remote successfully. His notes and transcriptions of Zoom interviews note firsthand his thought. He noted, “Student engagement in learning needed constant daily contacts (e.g., phone calls) outside the ZOOM meetings...” (p. 6). “Daily communication was key...” (p.8). More personally he expressed:

Checking on my students’ well-being and asking them about their day was crucial for me. Nurturing good student-teacher relationships is critical. Some of my students had to provide childcare for younger siblings and help with their schooling. Family support was not equal. (p. 9)

As well, Mr. Carl noted, “Socially reserved students enjoyed working at home.... Students are taking ownership a bit more because they’re no longer under the bell schedule of the school day” (p. 8). Author Kaden summarized some salient points from Mr. Carl’s case study including his effective approach to engaging students during remote learning: “Freed from the constraints of standards-based learning and the bell schedule, there was more time to focus on connected learning, hobbies, and interest-driven projects...” (p. 11). Students appeared to thrive as a result of meaningful instruction tailored to interests and as a result of a teacher’s deep and meaningful relationship with each student.

Illinois school band directors were surveyed to under their experiences as they transitioned to remote learning (RL) (Hash, 2021). One of the questions asked band directors to identify whom they relied upon for professional development or assistance as they moved online. Their choices were: Colleagues, Facebook and/or other platforms, Podcasts, Professional organizations, School Administrators, and School technology support. Only 49.6% of the respondents relied upon School Administrators, compared to 74% relying upon colleagues, and 53% relying upon School technology support (p. 389).

The American Institutes for Research (2021a) conducted a comprehensive study among elementary school principals from 43 states to determine answers to these questions about schooling from March 2020 to June 2021: “What innovative practices and new perspective emerged that they believed would be indelible, what learning emerged through the changes, and what challenges remain?” (p. 2). Among the innovative practices cited was “reengineering student flow (i.e., student movement into, through, and out of the school building)” (p. 5). Many reengineering ideas were noted: school start and end times, food service processes, lengthened class times and learning pods to limit movement of students between classrooms (p. 10). As a result of student flow changes, there were fewer discipline

issues. As well, principals noted the forced use of instructional technology led to considering technology use for enrichment, remediation, and future school closures. Among new learning, the study cited “for some students, technology offered a better way to engage with content and provided a better social space for learning...” (p. 7). And, through remote learning, seeing students in their homes or in other places where they had wi-fi service, helped teachers recognize and understand the many challenges their and their families faced. Greater communication and collaboration between schools and parents created better understanding of each other’s vulnerabilities, values, and beliefs. Principals in the study think these changes will continue.

In a study conducted by the American Institutes for Research (2021b) how principals perceived how their work changed during the 2020-2021 school year as aligned to the PSEL standards. PSEL Standard 6 concerns supporting the professional development of teachers to promote student academic success. Simply stated this concerns teacher evaluation. The study noted this difference when comparing to a previous study. “In 2018, a majority of principals said that teach evaluation and development were key areas of concern for them (Fuller et al., 2018). In the focus groups for this study, principals did not mention teacher evaluation. Instead, they discussed teacher development in the context of learning new skills, rather than building on teachers’ strengths, as part of a continuum of learning and development as a professional” (p. 10). PSEL Standard 8 concerns meaningful engagement of families and communities. The report noted principals spent more time engaging with families. “All principals in the study said that engagement with families was more important in 2020-2021 than ever before because many students learned from home and many of their families experienced health and economic changes. Principals said that they spent more time communicating with families than they had done in the past...” and “Principals and other educators made extra efforts to reach families and students, particularly students who stopped coming to school either virtually or in-person (p. 11). PSEL Standard 9 concerns operations and management. Principals spent much time working to assign use of space that would accommodate groups of students appropriately socially distanced.

The changes administrators, teachers, students, and parents navigated adapting to COVID-19 revealed challenges as well as some opportunities to adapt and grow. Will APs in Illinois share similar views and results?

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

The research design for this study is phenomenological. Phenomenology is used “to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who experienced it so as to understand the meaning participants ascribe to that phenomenon” (Teherani, et al., 2015, p. 669) and is well-suited to developing a picture of APs’ perceptions of how their role, relationships, and responsibilities were altered by the phenomenon of COVID-19.

Interview questions were developed to gather perceptions of the AP participants. Each interview led by asking what word or phrase best described the AP’s role during the past year’s pandemic. Questions that followed asked about differences in the AP’s responsibilities as an instructional leader and as a disciplinarian, pre-pandemic and during the last year. When needed, an example or more detail was requested a response. Participants were asked how relationships with students, parents, and teachers differed from the past. Concluding questions in the interviews were: What have you learned about your job that leads you to think differently about it in the future? What have you practiced this year that is a practice to maintain? What processes were modified to accommodate COVID-19 protocols, and which of these do you believe would be worthwhile to maintain when your school moves toward a new normal?

Interviews were conducted using Zoom which enabled video and audio recordings of the interviews to be retained for analysis. The researcher and participants were visible to each other keeping cameras on during the interview. The interviews lasted 30 minutes or less. While the interviews were conducted from January through June 2021, the APs interviewed were responding to questions reflecting on their experiences from mid-March 2020 through fall 2020.

## **Participants**

Over 600 APs were identified from the Illinois State Board of Education's 2020 EIS Salary Public Data Set. The data set included APs from Illinois regions other than Chicago and its collar counties. The data set was divided into six sets. In each of these sets, there were school districts with no APs, one AP, or two or more APs. To ensure no individual district had over representation, districts were randomly numbered. A random numbers table excerpt was used to randomize the participant recruitment (Creswell, 2008, p. 153). When twenty participants were identified by random selection, the email address at their school was determined and a request-to-participate email was sent. Most persons willing to participate responded within a day or two. Interviews were set up as soon as possible. After several rounds of request emails, the need to stratify the sampling was necessary to represent a balance of responses from APs of elementary, middle, and high schools. The six sets were used again for this stratified sampling. Sets of 20 email requests to participate in Zoom interviews were sent to several random selections of over 200 APs from this list. During a period of six months, the email requests resulted in interviews with 15 willing participants, six high school APs, four middle school APs, and five elementary school APs.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

Zoom recordings of the interviews were captioned. Each interview was transcribed from reading the captions and listening to either the audio or video Zoom recording. For each transcript, a code was developed which anonymously identified the person whose responses were recorded. The codes include three identifiers: (a) a number assigned to each person interviewed; (b) an M or an F for a male or a female AP interviewed; and (c) a grade span representing the grade span in the school where they served as AP. As an example, 1M9-12 is interview 1, a male AP, in a 9-12<sup>th</sup> grade high school. All Zoom recordings have been stored in the researcher's university's video vault subscription platform. The recordings can only be accessed with the researcher's login and password. All research documents are stored on a portable drive in a locked cabinet in researcher's campus office.

Analysis of data in this study is guided by Corbin and Strauss' qualitative analysis approach (2008). The transcript of each participant's responses was printed, cut apart, and organized by responses to each of the research questions concerning changes in role and responsibilities related to instructional leadership, in role and responsibilities related to discipline, in relationships related to instructional leadership, in relationships related to discipline, and organized by participants' responses to questions about what was learned and what practices would be worthwhile to continue. Following this organization of responses, the researcher re-read and reviewed the collected group responses. Using open coding, the researcher created notes when finding greater "meaning" in the responses than a mere example of a change associated with the "phenomenon" of COVID-19 changes. These notes, accompanied by additional analysis, established the coding, as Corbin and Strauss describe, "taking raw data and raising it to a conceptual level" (p. 66). The APs' perceptions of how their role, relationships, and responsibilities had changed reflected new and unexpected outcomes compared to previous experiences. These outcomes led APs to reveal new ways of conceptualizing their role, relationships, and responsibilities and codes related to student discipline, teacher evaluation, and relationships. Interrelationships among codes were

noted. As an example, when time spent on discipline was reduced, APs had more time to spend on fostering relationships with students, parents, and teachers. Themes that emerged from the coding were: the role of disciplinarian had diminished; the responsibilities associated with teacher evaluation had become coaching, and relationships with stakeholders were became more productive.

## **Results**

The role, relationships, and responsibilities of APs adapted to COVID-19 instructional protocols during remote and return-to-school instruction from March 2020 through December 2020 in Illinois. This period of time led to changes in their role, relationships, and responsibilities. Discipline issues had declined. Teacher evaluations were discontinued for some time as teachers needed time and support as they adjusted their instruction to remote learning. Families of students reached out to APs for support as students were adapting to learning virtually. Dramatic shifts were made in the way Illinois schools delivered instruction.

When APs were asked what one word or phrase they would use to describe their role during COVID-19, supportive, flexible, and evolving were cited most frequently. Other descriptors were multi-tasking, chaos, significant, and intentional. In these responses, APs appear to understand the balance between being strategic about actions and being aware of human needs.

### **Changes in the Role of Disciplinarian**

Typically, AP job requirements include handling student discipline and evaluating teachers. When asked about handling student discipline during COVID-19, APs reported student discipline referrals had decreased substantially, which led to more time for helping teachers, students, and families. Fewer discipline referrals were attributed to a variety of changes to past practice. APs attributed several changes to this reduction in discipline issues.

In elementary schools, morning assemblies, lunch procedures, smaller class sizes, and the motivation of being with school friends contributed to reduced discipline issues:

My role with discipline just ended. Smaller class size was huge. Kids finally getting to leave their homes and see their friends. They were so thankful and happy just to get to go to school. Lunch procedures were a huge game changer. It operated like a restaurant, so they're being served [their trays]. Manners were taught and expectations were taught. We're not going to have morning assembly next year. We're going to go straight to classrooms. (13F1-5)

Wearing masks, along with social distancing, were perceived as having a positive effect on student behavior:

We didn't have discipline issues. I think kids appreciate being here. They didn't have a lot of time with their friends, so they didn't want to be away from their friends. There probably could be something said for having masks on and social distancing. We did not have discipline issues. The majority of our discipline happened in the afternoon and they're going home by the afternoon. If we didn't learn something from this, we have done a disservice to ourselves. In general, I think that teachers like their structure, and they really had to like flip that upside down, and I have a ton of respect for them. For a majority of them this is not easy. Once you know better, you have to do better. (10F1-5)

Eliminating morning assembly in the gym and creating more cafeteria sections reduced discipline and created a positive atmosphere. An AP offered these perceptions:

I'm doing a lot less discipline. And really, everything seems to be a lot more positive this year. Not a lot of complaints. A lot of the negativity is gone. We have been in-person and parents are

appreciative. We've had very few discipline issues this year. We went from two cafeterias to six. It has been fabulous. It was a nightmare in the beginning to staff. Not putting 500 kids in the gym in the morning has helped tremendously in setting a positive tone, not going into this noisy crowded room. (3E1-5)

Moving from remote learning to in-person learning in some schools was a choice and in other schools, it was an expectation. An AP identified an increase in truant students reducing discipline referrals: I'm primarily the discipline side. In the spring [2020] it was just staying afloat getting stuff to students at home. In the fall, returning discipline is lighter because the kids that need to be here the most aren't. The kids who have been truant in the past are extremely truant this year. (2E1-8)

Among other things, access to hallway lockers was eliminated. An AP noted this was welcomed by teachers:

I think it's amazing how little discipline issues that we have had. I think the masks have a lot to do with that. Plus, the shortened school day. We cut down mitigation by not having big lunchrooms. We never used lockers this year. The kids brought backpacks. The teachers overwhelmingly...said, "Can we just not use lockers next year, because we had no tardies this year?" (11M6-8)

A middle school AP plans to continue reducing unstructured time for the upcoming year, as he found this change to reduce his involvement with students:

I had a lot less interaction with students than I normally would. I attribute a lot of that to extremely small class sizes and no unstructured time because we weren't doing lunch and recess and PE. We are already talking about how we're going to reformat our unstructured time. (12F6-8)

Related to discipline, for the future, an AP noted the responsibility of the teacher connecting with parents if a discipline issue arises in a classroom:

I think one thing we're going to adjust next year is, we're going to have to do a little better job of like...I think sometimes we 'kill flies with sledgehammers.' That's a term we use around here, and I think a policy that I'm going to incorporate next year is if you send a kid to the office that's perfectly fine...you're going to call their parents, because I think that's one thing that's been missing. (14M6-8)

An AP provided the percentage of time they believed was devoted to discipline during COVID-19: "We've probably seen our discipline reduced by 80% which is incredibly significant. (5M9-12) "So, I tell teachers all the time, I've gone from being 75% disciplinarian, 25% curriculum director to 75% academic curriculum and 25% discipline." (5M9-12)

Changing the schedule to a modified block schedule, attributed to fewer discipline issues for a high school AP:

The one part of the job, the discipline, has probably been reduced by 95%. We have really limited the movement of our students to one passing period using a modified block schedule. There is less down time...like no extra passing period, no lunch supervision. No changing in the locker room. (8M-9-12)

Several APs cited examples of reducing students' unstructured time in specific areas or during particular time of the day. Lunch time and morning, large-group congregation was eliminated in this AP's school:

Eliminating lunch time takes a huge portion of discipline out of there. You know, kids aren't thirty minutes unsupervised, unstructured. One thing in our building that has also limited discipline is normally we would open at 7 a.m. and school wouldn't start till 7:45. Students would be milling around...the building...and that created discipline problems. More administration is on board now of greeting students at the door as they come in. (6M9-12)

Shortening length of the school day, reducing the number of classes students attended each day, and sending lunches home with students reduced discipline issues among high school APs:

We have shorter days (dismiss at 12:30 p.m.), so there's less disciplinary issues. Lunchroom issues...the vast majority of those are just nonexistent this year. Only going to about half the classes than they normally would. We have seen a huge reduction in disciplinary issues this year. To the point where if someone's in our office, it's almost a surprise. (4M9-12)

One high school AP expressed a sense of freedom resulting from a 50% reduction of discipline issues during lunch:

We have shortened our day. Losing our lunches has probably reduced our discipline by 50%. So let's say we go back to a regular 8 hour day...I'm going to have to make a conscious effort to not get sucked into the discipline as much. (5M9-12)

While many changes were made in schools that reduced discipline referrals, an AP acknowledged a focus on keeping students in school as opposed to suspending students:

Discipline is very light. I think I'd set a record with suspensions, but I will not suspend one student this year. What this means is our relationships with our students are improving. We're working as an administrative team on keeping the students in school. We have really changed our focus. We understand that suspending students is not the best alternative. Some discipline infractions, the discipline has to be carried out—gross misconduct. (1M9-12)

For one AP the shift from disciplinarian to being a source of support for students and families and to feeling a greater sense of purpose:

While this has been our most challenging year in a lot of ways, it's also been one in the six years I've been assistant principal and athletic director, this has been my most rewarding as far as dealing with kids and parents, you know, and feeling like I make a difference because—newsflash—discipline doesn't feel like you're making a difference, you're must management. (5M9-12)

Discipline referrals result in students spending time in an office, typically an AP's office rather than spending time in an instructional classroom. If discipline referrals in a school are significantly reduced by changes in school practices, this would mean, that more students are engaged instructionally in school. When new school practices are led to reduced discipline referrals it would be in the best interest of school stakeholders to consider the value of continuing these practices.

### **Change from Teacher Evaluator to Teacher Coach**

The transition to remote instruction created both challenges and opportunities for teachers, new and veteran. For teachers who had little experience with online learning and online platforms the conversion to online instruction was profound. For teachers who were teaching their students online and who had school-age children at home who were also learning online can only be imagined as anxiety-producing. Whether a teacher considered themselves a 'good' teacher or not, a teacher's mind would have questioned how their remote teaching would be evaluated—whether formally or informally and whether evaluated by students, parents, or APs. Yet, many teachers embraced the changes with a 'can-do' attitude, bolstered by support of other teachers and their administrators.

An elementary AP articulated her awareness of a variety of teacher needs and was sensitive to providing support to their teachers:

I think teachers were just in all different places through this, and a lot of it had to do with like their family dynamics set up. I think our teachers that were struggling the most were our veteran teachers that did not have a lot of experience with technology, in that kind of shift of having to get more comfortable with like the platforms and everything. So those teachers were just needing

a lot more support in that way. But then I think the other group of teachers that I think were struggling the most were teachers who had young kids at home that were trying to navigate all of that because childcare was, you know, maybe not an option, or you know their kids would get put in quarantine, and they were trying to like watch their kids and do their lessons and keep up on and support their kids in the classroom and things like that. So, I just think giving them grace as much as possible. (10F1-5)

Prioritizing relationships with teachers was recognized as valuable approach to supporting teachers by an elementary AP:

I think just to be a voice of reason for teachers. Our teachers, I guess, they put a lot of, so much pressure on themselves, and just from this side saying, "You need to stop. You need to do what's important, and then you need to give yourself grace." Try and take the pressure off. Focus on relationships and do what we can instructionally. (13F1-5)

Relationships between the AP and teachers were perceived to be more collaborative, compared to practices associated with observations and evaluations:

Some teachers were only remote. Some teachers were hybrid. So just doing what we could to assist those educators in that role.... It was a lot of home visits, a lot of what can I do to take something off your plate? Because you're working on these lesson plans and adapting everything, just how can I be of assistance. A word we threw out all year long was 'grace.' I think our staff needed to know very early on our Superintendent set the bar that staff didn't have to be evaluated if they didn't want to and that was not going to be held against them. Just kind of explaining the process of...it's more of a collaboration with us. Let us see what you're doing and learn from it. (15M4-6)

As teachers navigated new ways of teaching, they questioned their performance. An AP perceived closer, "more personal" relationships with teachers, as well as students and staff:

The people who I thought would be really difficult in this situation [remote teaching] weren't, and people that have always been laid back...were sometimes more concerned with things. So, getting to know people on a deeper level, more personal, like "What are your beliefs?" I think that really did help. So, not only with staff but with students as well. (13F1-5)

From March 2020 through December 2020, many Illinois schools did not continue with formal teacher evaluations. During this time, many APs were more available to support teachers with curriculum and instructional needs during remote learning, through June 2020. During fall 2020's return-to-school plans, the shortened days, reduced schedules, and less student supervision, again allowed APs to be more available to teachers' curricular and instructional needs.

An elementary AP noted informal conversations about instruction replaced formal evaluations:

Not having formal evaluations has taken a lot of stress off the teachers. I have a lot more time to spend just dropping in on classrooms now. My interaction is a lot more informal, but we're still talking a lot about instruction. (3E1-5)

COVID-19 instructional changes helped an AP work with and support teachers in making critical decisions about instructional changes:

The biggest thing early on was our teachers were piling too much on (students) in remote because this year the grading counted, compared to last year, when really, we just kind of passed them. I think it showed the flexibility in our staff this year, that normally teachers are hard to be flexible. Change is tough on them. But they really showed how much they cared for the kids. I think it made them more lean and mean. (11M6-8)

A similar perception was held by a high school AP, noting their role shifting from an evaluator to a coach, providing new strategies for reaching a goal:

We found that less is more sometimes. Instead of making sure we cover ten things, let's cover seven of them really, really, really well. That's one of the biggest takeaways I think our teachers are seeing. March of last year [2020], we just took all the rules and threw them out the window. What's going to work best, and it's kind of liberating. Why can't we do things like this instead of that? Well, that's the way we always did it. Well, there's been a huge paradigm shift. (5M9-12)

Through informal conversations and observations, a high school principal had observed the need to encourage teachers to understand social-emotional needs of students first:

I think that's been the biggest thing...the way we structure everything. We can be more efficient in what we do, which would then allow us to do some of those other things you're talking about with relationships and some social-emotional issues. We have to take a look at how we're getting information across to the kids and what information we're getting across. (4M9-12)

When Illinois moved to remote instruction, all student work could be considered homework. An elementary AP, used this as an opportunity to talk about how individualized independent student learning was impacting students:

I struggle with homework when it is 'new' teaching just because there's not people at home to support them, and they're practicing it wrong. So, we talked about actual learning in classroom and practice in online programs kind of like rethinking all of that. There are some kids that have thrived in this environment. We have one little boy with severe anxiety, and we've had recent conversations with his mom, and like he can make it to lunch. The afternoons are really bad for him, and this is something that we just need to look at for him. And some of these kids, even in 4th and 5th grade could stay at home for years. They have thrived in it. (10F1-5)

A few APs noted there were teachers in their schools who were unaware of the negative consequences COVID-19 was having on some students and their families. An elementary principal provided this reflection:

The conversation I have had the most with teachers is the poor grade this kid is receiving is the most important thing going on in this kid's life right now. There is no normal in their home, and we're upset that they are not doing grade level work. (2E1-8)

A high school AP, as well, noted the need for teachers to be more aware of their students' backgrounds:

Restorative practices research has shown me that we have some teachers that may not understand poverty, the effect the pandemic has on families. The one thing I learned that I was a little shocked with is some teachers could not relate to poverty. (1M9-12)

APs learned new ways of working with teachers during COVID-19. Certainly, teachers learned new ways of providing instruction to their students. How these new ways of working with teachers and new ways of teaching will inform instruction in the future for students is important for teachers and administrators to consider.

## **Change in Relationships**

In each of the previous two themes reported in the findings, discipline and teacher evaluation, APs reported communicating more frequently with teachers and parents leading to more relationships, with more teachers, parents/guardians, and ultimately students. The communications APs had with teachers and parents were more personal, more specifically focused on needs of individuals, whether a student, a teacher, or a parent or guardian. People-focused communications created relationships based on trusting the support of APs.

Home visits in many Illinois schools became somewhat routine in March 2020. Items left at school were delivered to homes. In some schools, assignments were delivered for a period of time until remote



learning could be established. And, in some cases, students who needed extra support, had visits from counselors, social workers, teachers, and APs.

An AP from a large high school was supported in home visits by a number of school service personnel: "Home visits have definitely increased. We're at about 2,000 home visits, emails, and phone calls to homes of students who are struggling." (7M-912)

An AP stepped in to visit homes when teachers could not: "A teacher who has no luck with a student returning work...for maybe two weeks...at that point I use the resources that I have. I have time to knock on the student's door and talk with the parent." (1M9-12)

Several APs noted student families in their district were struggling as a result of COVID-19's effects on daily family needs. APs also noted many of their teachers were unaware of how the COVID-19 was effecting some of their students.

Distributing school lunches to students in this AP's school continued after remote learning ended: Our families are struggling. We've had a lot of parents that have been out of work and we're trying to be flexible and to work with them. And now we've still been providing lunches even when we were remote, we were packing lunches and distributing them to every family in our school district for every day that the kids weren't here. (12F6-8)

An elementary AP remarked on how much the teachers learned about the lives of their students from making "home" visits to help students and their families:

I think my job really changed from more of an instructional leader to a social worker. I was doing a lot of home visits. I feel like our teachers know their parents better than ever right now. I think the teachers have just really had the opportunity to get inside houses, you know with students remote and kind of see the dynamics, and they really had to communicate with parents more than ever. I definitely saw that shift...like delivering food...dropping off supplies....doing visits to hotels for kids that were homeless...just trying to kind of meet people where they were, you know. I feel I've learned so much. (10F-1-5)

Two high school APs noted the students who held jobs and were working to help their families. One AP reflected encouraging teachers to be understanding:

We are working with teachers on trying to get them to understand why they [students] cannot get their work in. We want them [teachers] to build rapport. An example is a student who is working and not able to be face-to-face remote. A teacher needs to understand this. They [students] are doing this to survive. (1M9-12)

A high school AP had a similar conversation with a teacher about students being employed in part-time jobs:

I know several of our students have selected to go remote learning and work full-time jobs, 8 o'clock to noon, and they do their remote instruction from 1 to 3. They need the money because of their situation. Many of the teachers were really put back by that because they felt that the remote learner should have been for the student that had a parent that had medical issues.... (8M9-12)

The value of relationships replaced the value an AP had placed on data. Conversations moved from discipline to helping students and families:

I have done more home visits than I have ever done. And prior to COVID-19, the conversation might have been discipline or your child is failing. Now, I look at attendance data and ask why they are not here at school. The conversation has switched from your child misbehaved to, "Do I need to bring a Chromebook to you?" "Do we need to get lunch to you?" "I'm here to support you in any way I can." I have learned more about my families than I have ever learned before. I was a data person. But I've learned this year...relationships that we build with kids and families is more important than any number that comes across my desk. (9F6-8)

A high school AP noted some teachers need to “grow” in the area of developing relationships with students to provide more social-emotional support to them:

The closer you are relationally with your students generally the better effort and the better outcome. Some [teachers] are really, really good at that aspect and some of them have some growing to do in that area...the social emotional aspect, especially coming off this pandemic where students have had less social activity. (4M9-12)

A junior high school AP noted a closer relationship with guidance counselors and social workers in their building:

It’s almost like we have turned into full-time counselors for families and for kids along with our guidance counselors and social workers. Probably worked more closely with them this year than we ever had. (11M6-8)

An elementary AP reflected on how learning to use new tools to facilitate remote instruction, has resulted in better communications with parents and guardians:

Making sure kids feel safe in school is number 1. Number 2 is reading, writing, math and sticking to that. Also, even though the teachers and I get upset about this as well, giving parents grace.... I think it was really important to give the parents grace through all of this. And, also (give the parents) options. We were always supposed to give all of the options, but we just didn’t or we didn’t use these platforms we weren’t comfortable with, so it wasn’t something we offered. And we’ve had better attendance with parent meetings than we’ve ever had because we’ve offered, you know not in-person at the beginning of the year, until recently. But you know, “Do you want a phone call? Do you want to Zoom? Do you want to chat over Dojo?” You know, just so many different media we’re used to. So, the parents could do what they were comfortable with, and therefore they participated more. (13F1-5)

An analogy an AP shared was meaningful in its connection to knowing the hidden background of students in order to be able to help them:

We were talking as a staff the other day. I went through some trauma-informed professional development...and remembering how...last spring we for the first time had that actual bird’s eye into the homes, yes, and that was eye-opening. I’ve seen more poverty on this side of education than I ever have in my years teaching in the classroom. I’m trying to get the staff to remember this as we move forward. I told my staff long before we put these things on, [the person being interviewed holds up a face mask] we were all wearing masks, whether we recognize it in our kids or not. (15M4-6)

An elementary AP found relationship-building with parents benefitted from greeting parents at drop-off and pick-up:

We don’t have a lot of parent participation in our district, but so many parents did decide to transport their children to school. I feel like I have made connections with more parents than I normally would doing parent pick-up and drop-off everyday...just shooting the breeze and getting to know them. It’s been good. (13F1-5)

An AP shared how conversations with parents changed over the course of months of instruction association with COVI-19 protocols:

There was a wide range of emotion as the year ebbed and flowed. That first nine weeks, lots of parent phone calls of “What are we supposed to be doing? How do I make this website work? Where is my login for this? ...At the end of the quarter, “I don’t know how you people do this!” “Take my kids back, please!” “You guys are awesome.” (15M4-6)

“No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship” is a quote attributed to Dr. James P. Comer, a well-known, child development expert. The immediate impact of COVID-19, moving to remote instruction, created an opportunity for school personnel to have a deeper insight into the lives of

the school's students. Remote instruction also led to new and vital ways of communicating with students and their families to keep students engaged. New channels of communicating resulted in opportunities to support the academic needs of students, and in addition, support the social-emotional needs of students and their families. Learning of challenges students and families faced allowed schools to provide support of supplies and food to sustain relationships with struggling families and their students. How relationships were established and maintained during COVID-19, should be a discussion among faculty and staff, that leads to sustaining practices that had led to better student and family engagement.

## Discussion

APs in this study cited outcomes of organizational changes in practices and processes in their schools, that may be the future of what prek-12 schools need focus on to improve student achievement in the future: reducing student discipline referrals; to maintain a variety of approaches to engage students in instruction; coaching teachers to improve instruction rather than evaluating teachers and providing a rating; and understanding vulnerabilities of students and families to establish relationships.

Lewin's (1947) change model includes Unfreeze, Change, and Refreeze. School administrators were forced to "unfreeze" in-person instruction during the spring of 2020 as Illinois schools moved to remote instruction. The driving force in this change was the Illinois governor's executive order. The restraining forces were many but most challenging were access to materials, like computers and wi-fi, and teacher and student ability to adapt successfully to the instructional delivery change. The role, relationships, and responsibilities of APs changed to facilitate the unfreezing step. APs communicated more directly with and established more relevant relationships with students, teachers, and families at the outset of the COVID-19 changes in their schools. Another unfreezing occurred in fall of 2020, as many of the schools of APs in this study had a return-to-school plan, which in some cases accommodated both remote and in-person instruction. Social-distancing requirements in school buildings was the driving force included in these plans impacted change. Reducing the number of students in areas where students formally congregated, eliminating unstructured time for groups of students, more lunch sections for fewer students, sending lunches home with students, early dismissal, shortened school day, are examples of restraining forces where changes were needed and made. APs in this study commented many of these changes had been widely supported and embraced by stakeholders. APs in this study recognized for some students a shortened day, when dismissal was at noon, and students left with a lunch to take home, positive engagement was tolerable, with fewer discipline or attention issues. As well, there were some students who thrived and even excelled learning independently and remotely from home. If these changes are maintained, adopted as a practices and procedures, they may meet the expectations for Lewin's Refreeze step.

The initial trauma teachers experienced in moving from in-person instruction to remote instruction cannot be understated. The anxiety typically associated with classroom teaching evaluations was heightened among teachers learning to teach remotely, re-evaluating what they taught, and re-thinking how they would teach. Many schools put a pause on teacher evaluations in consideration of the challenges teachers were facing as they adapted to remote instruction. Teachers' greatest concerns were about how to deliver remote instruction that would meet their students' needs. APs provided instructional and emotional support to teachers as they transitioned to remote instruction. A level of trust developed as APs were more accessible to teachers, listening to their concerns and needs, providing help to them as opposed to visiting classrooms once or twice a year for an evaluation. APs had become coaches to teachers, providing formative feedback, rather than summative rating as an evaluator. APs had greater recognition of instructional growth over time among many teachers.

From in-person instruction to remote instruction at first take would be considered what Marzano, et al. (2005) cite as a second-order change, a dramatic departure from the norm. However, what is reflected in the comments from APs processed this change with teachers as a first-order change. APs coached teachers to manage the transition in manageable steps and to reconsider what learning was vital. APs modeled second order change responsibilities of listening to teachers, hearing their concerns, and provide stability to teachers as they tested new ways of teaching.

Building relationships, authentic relationships with stakeholders is imperative for school administrators. APs in this study overwhelming understood learning the value of relationships and revealed this through their comments. The importance of relationships was cited in several articles which captured how COVID-19 made changes to the way teaching and learning was handled in schools (American Institutes for Research (2021b); Amis & Janz, 2020; Anderson & Hira, 2020; Brelsford et al., 2020; Kaden, 2020; Martinez & Broemmell, 2021; O'Connell & Clarke, 2020). For APs in this study relationship building required being responsive and understanding of families' and teachers' struggles to help students learning remotely. APs indicated that visiting homes, providing materials to help students learning remotely engaged far more parents than had been engaged in the past in their children's schooling. When schools returned tout socially distanced learning, teachers were engaged in re-designing and modifying practices to keep students, faculty and staff engaged and safe.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

While there have been several articles written describing the many challenges associated with COVID-19 and its effect on schools, there have been few articles in the literature that focus directly on specific changes and in the role, relationships, and responsibilities of school leaders, specifically APs.

The random selection of APs in Illinois for this study took into consideration a majority of APs are employed in junior and senior high schools with fewer APs employed in elementary schools. An objective in this study was to balance the number of APs interviewed across the three types of school served. For this reason, there could have been more purposeful random selection among junior and high school APs. For the many APs contacted who did not respond to the interview request, Zoom-meeting fatigue may have contributed to their unwillingness to participate.

This study focused on the changes in the role, relationships, and responsibilities among APs and students, teachers, and student families who were participating in remote and/or in-person schooling during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of this study may be in conflict with other outcomes not addressed in the study as in, issues related to students and families whom APs were unable to locate, were unable to be reached, were unresponsive to emails, phone calls, and/or to home visits.

The results of this study only reflect the perceptions of APs, while not addressing the perceptions of others present in the schools or in the school district. The APs' willingness to maintain changes discussed in this paper may be over-ridden by superintendent and/or board decisions.

Future research might engage these APs in follow-up interviews to see if COVID-19 changes have continued to be present in their schools. Questions to ask might include asking if the APs advocated to maintain changes in practices that led to better outcomes for students, as in fewer discipline referrals and asking if opinions of teachers, students, and families contributed to decision-making concerning these changes? In addition, the APs might be asked how student instruction and communications with students and student families have evolved or returned to past practices.

### **Conclusion**

This study reveals changes in the role, relationships, and responsibilities of APs during COVID-19 remote learning and return-to-school learning. In some examples, these changes led to better outcomes for students, fewer in-school discipline issues, for teachers, more coaching, less evaluating, and more and

stronger relationships among all school stakeholders. These established successful practices should be maintained and become the norm.

Research on organizational change predicts these changes may not become the norm. Two recent articles concerning the how the pandemic has transformed organizational change, provide cautionary warnings. Windmueller (2021) paraphrases five principles of resiliency during organizational change from a Bain and Company study. One statement stands out, “Innovations happen sporadically rather than systematically. And when the emergency fades, people typically return to traditional command/and/control innovation until the next crisis arises, when they just reinvent agile approaches all over again.” Similarly, Thomas (2020) urges organizational leaders to assess how the culture of the organization responded to the changes. This assessment:

...is to prevent the easy relapse into old, and sometimes bad habits, and to preserve new-found trust, empowerment and collaboration. Finding the good elements of the sudden culture change, taking pride in them, can reinforce these shifts in behavior for the long-term (n.p.).

These explicit cautionary quotes should suggest an opportunity for APs to have discussions with teachers, students, and families to ask for their perceptions of changes to practices and procedures during COVID-19. If stakeholder perceptions cite similar changes as improving outcomes for teachers, students, and families, APs should advocate for instituting these changes for the future. Returning to practices and procedures prior to mid-March 2020, will suggest from mid-March through December 2020, nothing was learned from the experiences of APs, students, teachers, and parents, when much appeared to be learned from the changes.

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# Developing Equitable School Leaders in a Predominantly White Rural Educational Leadership Program in the US

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the International Council of Professors of Educational Leadership (ICPEL) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



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*Education systems in the United States (US) increasingly experience disagreement over how to address cultural and societal injustices. At the heart of these debates includes the role of the rural sociocultural experience – which in the US is based on racial and spatial isolation, the idea of whiteness as the norm, and more recently economic deprivation due to globalization. This paper examines the experiences of 17 aspiring educational leaders in a predominantly White rural state in the US. Drawing from the field of cultural psychology, this study illustrates the role educational preparation programs must play in developing greater sociocultural awareness among White educational leadership candidates who lack exposure to racially and culturally diverse environments. Using findings from this study, preparation programs and school districts in predominantly White rural areas can foster greater self-reflection for educators to address social injustices, as well as reject ahistorical and apolitical philosophies of education.*



There is a robust body of literature on the development of urban educational leadership programs, specifically on the development of racially and socially just educational leaders to serve in an urban context (Dantley, 2005; Green, 2015; Rivera-McCutchen, 2020). While there is no 'official' listing, by conducting a simple search online, one can find over 50 universities throughout the US that offer some form of urban education leadership development. Additionally, urban education continues to receive enormous attention in the form of grant funding, philanthropic donation, and financial leveraging to influence school systems on a large scale (Turnbull et al., 2021). However, there is little focus provided to rural educational leadership programs as there are only a few rural leadership centers which are currently studying the needs of rural schools and of rural school leadership development (Superville, 2021).

As noted by Parson et al. (2016), the challenges encountered by "the rural principal often fundamentally differ from those of urban and suburban principals" (p. 63). Many rural school leaders "face cultural and stereotypical characterizations of rural life and living and therefore, by extension, cultural and stereotypical characterizations regarding the worth and quality of rural education" (Surface, 2014, p. 567). The stereotyping and treatment of rural schools and the education provided in these schools became a great debate following the election of Donald Trump, particularly the critique of US rural schools existing to serve as a resource for the development of the global economy (Biddle & Hall, 2017). Given the focus placed on the US urban experience, as well as the cultural and social capital that is concentrated in many urban areas, many young rural people continue to leave for urban areas that provide greater opportunities than if they were to stay in the rural US (Corbett, 2007).

Given the lack of attention on the development of rural educational leadership programs in the US, as well as the increased awareness of the important role rural education systems can have on influencing the sociocultural conditions of the US, this study contributes to the understanding cultural psychology plays on the future development of rural educational leaders. Specifically, this study examines how one educational leadership program in a predominantly White rural state can inform the development of aspiring principal candidates to help develop greater sociocultural awareness to address social injustices in rural spaces across the US. The study examined one primary research question, namely, "How and in what ways can preparation programs and school districts in predominantly White rural areas foster greater self-reflection for educators to address social injustices, as well as reject ahistorical and apolitical philosophies of education?"

### **Rural Education in the US**

Rural education systems have historically received less attention than urban education counterparts regarding school improvement initiatives and have been provided less funding to help address lack of resources within rural communities, all of which creates demanding workloads for rural principals who must attend to a wide variety of stressors to keep rural schools running (Klar & Huggins, 2020). Referred to as the 'rural problem' (Tieken, 2014), neoliberal policies help reinforce urban-centric paradigms about how schools should operate, particularly as it relates to economic growth, efficiency, and economies of scale that tend to favor larger and typically urban school systems (Butler, 2014). However, over the past decade there has been growing interest in studying how rural schools contribute to more equitable outcomes in the US, a country that continues to experience rapid demographic diversification and migration (Hardwick-Franco, 2019; McHenry-Sorber & Hall, 2018). Specifically, there is a need to study how school leaders in rural areas are being developed to produce more equitable outcomes for all rural students, including but not limited to understanding how rural areas address racial, socioeconomic, and spatial inequities that in turn influence how or if inclusive practices translate into predominantly white rural classrooms and school buildings.

Clearly there is a need to develop high-quality rural school leaders who can deliver equitable outcomes for rural students and families, however rural schools also often experience high levels of turnover among educators that lack the professional development networks (Rowland, 2017). The lack of ongoing rural-relevant leader development for leaders, as well as the retention of rural school leaders, is critical to address (Orphan & McClure, 2019), particularly if rural schools are to contribute to helping make the US a more equitable and just society. As such, the role of rural leadership development – and the sociocultural development needs of rural school leaders – is of utmost importance.

### **Sociocultural factors in the Rural US**

There are countless examples of how rural education in the US is stereotyped in popular culture, (Gallo, 2020), including the poverty experienced by students, the lack of resources available to teachers, and perhaps most pronounced, the lack of cultural capital available to rural students and parents (Mette, forthcoming). Outside of the rural South, many rural US communities historically have been defined as predominantly White, which most recently has been explored through geographic locations and the large percentage of the population (80% or more) that identifies as White (Mann et al., 2021). In these spaces, educators, parents, and students alike might not question a lack of racial diversity due to the fact they have no real reference point of an existence that requires an understanding of anything other than a White experience. Thus, these rural communities reinforce the idea of the ‘racial contract’ which defines space, particularly who is allowed to live in rural areas, based on whiteness (Mills, 1997), as well as what is stereotypically considered ‘normal’ for the rural US.

While the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) classifies 27.6% of rural US students as people of color (2013), rural US schools continue to experience rapid racial and ethnic diversification (Biddle & Mette, 2017). These shifts are influenced by neoliberal policies and the demographic changes that result from a globalized economy, both of which produce an increasingly diverse student body as it relates to race, ethnicity, and culture (Ylimaki et al., 2016). As such, rural US schools that historically have been spatially and racially isolated will increasingly need leadership that is able to challenge the idea of ‘whiteness as the norm’ (Lynch, 2018). While this type of educational leadership training has occurred in urban areas of the US for several decades now, it is not something that has received much attention in the literature around training for ruralcentric principal development.

Perhaps most important is the consideration of how school leaders need to address the historic sociocultural factors influencing the traditions of rural education in the US. Specifically, as the rise in nationalism continues to influence the political system in the US and around the world (Bieber, 2018), rural school systems will need educational leaders who are able to question how systems of oppression have been created based on race (Mealy, 2020) and how social systems reinforce white supremacy. These challenges go beyond addressing Eurocentric curricula or addressing achievement gaps based on race, but rather will require educational leaders who are able to engage with students, parents, and teachers who are invested in maintaining whiteness as the norm. This includes developing local education policies that encourage and protect teachers to engage in equitable education efforts even in the face of state legislation that bans critical analysis of race in the US (Sawchuk, 2021).

### **Cultural Psychology and Education**

This paper is informed by the cultural psychology literature to help educational leadership preparation programs better conceptualize the developmental needs of their students as it relates to sociocultural understanding. Cultural psychology provides a theoretical lens that allows educators to analyze how culture, values, and historic relationships inform ways of knowing through shared

experiences (Cohen & Kitayama, 2019; Guan et al., 2020; Heine, 2010). Cultural psychology also allows researchers to study and identify factors that cause a person to adopt a certain paradigm about society, specifically the interaction that occurs between the environment and a person that leads to cultural constructs (Cohen, 2019). Given these aspects of the theoretical framework, cultural psychology offers great opportunities for educational leadership preparation programs to better understand how people learn to identify with the school and the community they serve.

Kraus et al. (2012) posit that social class informs how we engage in shared experiences, specifically how it relates to access to resources, the formulation of knowledge, and responses to a social environment. This paper uses the work of Kraus et al. (2012) to better understand how social class, contextualism, and solipsism relate to the development of rural educational leaders. Defined as “a philosophical idea that centers on the notion that one’s own mind is a fundamental source of knowledge about the social world and is the primary influence on people’s everyday thought” (Kraus et al., 2012, p. 550), solipsism is highly influenced by social and economic factors. Within the context of the study, this framework is used to better understand how identities inform responses in leadership decisions around addressing changing rural demographics and what this means when addressing school systems that have historically accepted whiteness as the norm. Kraus et al. (2012) suggest social class influences a range of perceptions about control and thus perceptual tendencies, including the “sense that one’s actions are chronically influenced by external forces outside individual control” (p. 549) as well as the ability to pursue “goals and interests relatively free of concerns about their material costs” (p. 550). Thus, the ability to understand how social class is central to understanding how contextualism is oriented towards external factors and threats, and how solipsism is oriented towards internal beliefs and knowledge about the world, including identities such as race and gender, among many others.

Using this paradigm, cultural psychology allows those in rural leadership preparation programs to better prepare school leaders to be aware of race, class, access to scarce resources, social opportunities, and the ability to attend to personal emotional needs (Kraus et al., 2012). As it relates to the sociocultural factors influencing the rural US, rural educational leadership preparation programs can use this framework to more deeply explore and study how rural school leaders are prepared to move into educational leadership roles. Specifically, there is a need to address the influences of global economic decline, cultural and social deprivation, racial isolation due to historic control of where Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people live, and the ability to reimagine how rural education systems can contribute to a more equitable US society.

## **Methods**

### **Program Description and Participant Selection**

A rural educational leadership preparation program, located in the northern US in one of the most rural states in the country, serves as the case for this study. It is also a state with one of the highest percentages of citizens who identify as White. In this program there is an explicit focus on preparing educational leaders for the challenges they will face in rural schools. The program delivers instruction around interpersonal, cognitive, and intrapersonal aspects of leadership (Donaldson, 2008), but also on developing an equity lens for school leaders to assess, address, and improve organizational inequities, particularly for educators who work in predominantly White school buildings and school districts (Irby, 2021). Educators in this educational leadership program experience learning as a cohort, allowing future teacher leaders and principals to develop a professional network of support once they have completed the requirements of the degree.

The study included 17 aspiring educational leaders, all of whom were full-time educators in school systems throughout the northern rural US state. Of the 17 total participants, 10 were female and seven

were male. All identified as White. Nine were under the age of 40 and eight were 41 or older. Seven had nine or less years of experience and 10 had 10 or more years of experience. Table 1 provides more detail about the participants.

The educational leadership program in this study continually updates curriculum based on accreditation review cycles. Using evidence collected from the previous three years of instruction, the faculty in this program were intentional about increasing training to address equity in schools at the time of data collection. The data from this study are also evidence of future curriculum improvement efforts as part of the ongoing improvement cycle to ensure students are able to address organizational inequities through their own leadership development and apply their leadership skills within their own school building.

**Table 1**  
*Participant Demographics*

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Years of Experience</i>
1	M	White	45-49	15-19
2	F	White	35-39	15-19
3	M	White	25-29	5-9
4	M	White	25-29	5-9
5	F	White	35-39	10-14
6	F	White	50-54	25-29
7	F	White	30-34	5-9
8	M	White	25-29	0-4
9	F	White	50-54	25-29
10	F	White	25-29	0-4
11	F	White	25-29	5-9
12	F	White	45-49	25-29
13	M	White	45-49	25-29
14	F	White	40-44	5-9
15	F	White	45-49	20-24
16	M	White	45-49	15-19
17	M	White	35-39	10-14

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed and used for this study. Based on the research literature about sociocultural factors and cultural psychology development, including race, privilege, and socioeconomic status (SES), open-ended questions were asked during interviews that lasted roughly 45-60 minutes in length. These interviews were done through video-conferencing to protect people during the height of the pandemic. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis focused on identifying and understanding social constructs (Creswell, 2013; Herr & Anderson, 2015), as well as identifying and analyzing historical aspects of understanding (McIntyre, 2008), specifically as it connects to perceptions of race in US education. Initial coding utilized a provisional coding process related to the literature on sociocultural factors and identity development. Once the initial coding process was complete, memos and jottings were used to develop themes detailing the experiences of the participants (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2018). Themes were shared with participants as a form of member-checking to ensure validity by those who were interviewed (Saldaña, 2021).

## Findings

Three major categories emerged from this study, particularly as it relates to the perceptions of aspiring educational leaders in a predominantly White rural educational leadership program. The first category identifies the struggle to engage in class structures and confront capitalism in a racist society. The second category highlights reimagining solipsistic tendencies and orientations about educational outcomes. The third category underscores a rising awareness of spatially-induced racial illiteracy. The three findings are provided in more detail below.

### **Struggle to Confront Class and Capitalism in a Racist Society**

While the aspiring rural school leaders in the predominantly White rural educational leadership program spoke about their understanding of race, class, and privilege in the US in a variety of ways, a major theme that emerged from the data was their own efforts to deepen their understanding of racial inequities in the US they had developed over time as well as through their educational leadership training, and balancing this with their own lived personal experiences in economically depressed rural areas. Participants consistently identified how their attempts to learn about equitable educational practices and apply them in their schools conflicted with moral and political ideologies they were exposed to while being raised in predominantly White rural communities. One White rural aspiring school leader described what it was like to grow up in a White rural family:

I think as I've grown and been more aware of cultural differences and the fact that my family is...it's a pretty rural family and, they're family members – I love them – but as I got older through high school, going back to family events, I remember just hearing things...that they would say then that I remember thinking 'That's not really appropriate,' you know? And it was kind of a conflict for me because, you know, these are older cousins and aunts and uncles that I thought, you know, it wasn't really my place to correct them I guess, but, you know, and I didn't feel comfortable addressing it, but I also didn't feel comfortable with the way some things were said.

Participants also noted interpersonal conflicts that arose from applying these equity belief systems, specifically as they related to family members, co-workers, and community members who struggled living in poverty but that openly communicated racial biases. Another White rural aspiring school leader shared the following conversation with her father about class and racial privilege as it relates to his experience growing up in a poor White rural setting:

So my dad grew up very poor, and made something of himself.... And he tried to have the discussion with me that he doesn't believe that white privilege exists because he was someone that comes from a background of poverty and had to, you know, pull himself up from his bootstraps.... As someone coming from poverty, he should, you know, he should know that sort of thing. And so I talked to him about how he needs to recognize this idea of a system and that, um, just because his individual circumstance was one where he came from nothing and grew into something doesn't mean that the, that there isn't such a thing as white privilege, he still started in a different place than people of color.

As such, many of the participants commented they appreciated learning about equity awareness and more inclusive instructional practices, but there were also substantial pushback from community members and many were frustrated with communication strategies from their school district when there was forceful opposition from parents.

Participants also identified their leadership development and their struggles to confront class and capitalism in predominantly White communities in various ways. These White rural aspiring school

leaders specifically identified partisan politics and belief structures that are often associated with US rural areas as socially ingrained boundaries that prevent White people from identifying with the oppression experienced by historically marginalized communities, including but not limited to people who identify as Black, Latinx, or Indigenous. Participants also noted the limited identity of their predominantly White communities, particularly the inability for many poor White ruralites to see beyond their own economic struggles and the lack of empathy for those who come from historically marginalized communities in the US, especially as it relates to racial identity. Regarding these struggles, one participant shared:

It seems to me that when you look at the [our state] there are the people who seem to think that there's an issue in our country and the people that seem to think there is no issue or the issue is that people who are White are victimized. The group who don't think that there's an issue for minorities...seem to be really focused on their own experiences and not on the experiences as a whole country and the people who do see inequities seem to be more focused on the big picture...of what everybody's experiencing in the country.

Given these sociocultural challenges, the White rural aspiring school leaders also described what they considered a moral obligation to help their predominantly White rural communities learn more about ingrained racial biases as it relates to inequities in the US. Specifically, participants spoke about the need to combat social and political agendas that seek to reinforce ahistorical paradigms of education that perpetuate racial and class divisions. For many White rural aspiring school leaders, this required them to make difficult decisions about when to speak up and combat capitalist assumptions about the history of the US, as well as how to address broader concerns or fears of existing in a capitalist society that is seen as punishing to those living in poverty, regardless of racial identity. Reflecting her perception of confronting insular identities among her predominantly White rural counterparts, one aspiring leader shared:

I came to terms with [the fact that] we are a very White and very poor, very insular state. And so I felt an increased pressure, actually an opportunity, to say, 'Okay, because I am teaching in a place that is so insular I have an obligation to continue to try to open minds and encourage people to think about things differently.... [We need to] make the politicians and the people in power see that we have to flip things so that the poor are not continually oppressed and a lot of that involves and envelops racism.

Another participant noted:

I feel like a lot of White America feels like, 'Well, my life sucks. Uh, if your life sucks too, well, join the club.' ... I feel like, uh, unless you acknowledge the fact that there is a long history of injustice, if you don't feel that, if you don't feel that that's true...you're not willing to acknowledge that...we're operating in two different realities.

In sum, a majority of the White rural aspiring school leaders accepted the work of leading school systems to become more equitable and address racist ideologies well embedded in their communities. However, they also struggled to influence cultural values of fellow co-workers and family members to address racist tendencies that value whiteness as the norm, particularly for those who come from an economically impoverished background. Addressing these external influences are clearly part of educational leadership development that should be considered for preparation programs serving rural states.

### **Reimagining Ingrained Small Town Solipsistic Orientations About Education**

The White rural aspiring school leaders in this study discussed a variety of ways they have experienced professional development efforts to raise awareness about addressing inequitable outcomes in their own school districts. Participants commented on how their experiences and ways of thinking

about education is their primary source of knowledge about social structures, particularly how this influences their abilities to produce a high-quality educational environment. These reflections tie directly to the idea of solipsistic orientations about education, which are inherently connected to their experiences as White educators in the US.

Participants in this study specifically mentioned the need to carve out time, both personally and professionally, to learn about the lived experiences of historically marginalized groups in the US. These White rural aspiring school leaders described how their perspectives on the educational experiences of students changed and evolved over time through in-person trainings in their school district as well as through the coursework in their educational leadership preparation program. For example, participants described how they valued the opportunities to learn in small groups about how the racialized history of the US is perpetuated in systems today, including but not limited to the political, economic, and educational systems in the US. However, many of the aspiring school leaders described how the applied professional development in their school systems created a sense of applying a surface-level solution that was seen as a band aid to the larger social context of their education systems that reinforced and reified historical inequities. One participant shared a reflection on the broad approach to school districts attempts to 'address' historic inequities:

[There has to be] time set aside to do it not, um, you know, just kind of adding on to an already busy schedule and in small groups with adults that you trust and maybe bringing in, um, students or adults of color who have had experiences that could help, you know, so if we could talk – a lot of times the professional development tends to be large group – and it's just not conducive to delving into specific issues or situations or questions that people have. So I think it has to be a small group format where teachers are absolutely with people that they trust so that they can talk out issues.

Given the resource and time intensive approach that is needed for White educators to learn about ways to improve their education system to be more equitable and inclusive, participants also highlighted how they have begun the individual process to learn from others about ways of thinking about education in the US. By frequently engaging in online content created by people from historically marginalized groups in the US, many of the White rural aspiring school leaders described how they drove their own learning about how to create more equitable schools for all students in their communities. Participants provided examples of learning from others – specifically Black, Latinx, and Indigenous educators – through social media to help influence their development and understanding of education in the US that is neither ahistorical nor apolitical. When asked about this development, one White rural aspiring educational leader shared how he has gained new perspectives and knowledge about the US education system outside of his own understanding:

One way that I've done this recently...[is by] following people of color – influencers on social media. So like finding Black authors, Indigenous authors, social media, content creators, and just following them on Instagram or Facebook or whatever medium you might use, and every time you log into Facebook...you're going to get an update about what's going on in that community. I think that's a really, really good way...[to learn about things] White people just would never share... Those things are effective when they make you engage and they make you uncomfortable and they make you think about things in ways that you wouldn't have.

Developing the ability to 'unlearn' their own understanding of education in the US, particularly from the perspective of a White educator, proved to be an important concept for many aspiring educational leaders. By engaging in a process to reimagine the possibilities of their school systems, particularly by listening to and studying the lived experiences of the historically marginalized in the US, participants reflected on how learning from others to influence their knowledge of social structures and systems of oppression made them more inclusive educators. One educator commented as a result of

their intentional reflection, “I see my classroom and I see my community – so I’m able to address those inequities with my students, and be better aware, have a better awareness of, of the community and being able to address those inequities.”

### **Rising Awareness of Spatially-Induced Racial Illiteracy**

While many White rural aspiring educational leaders in this study discussed the ways in which they were able to address how class and race influence their school systems, as well as how they engaged in the work to unlearn many of their own solipsistic orientations about education, another consistent theme was the rising awareness of some participants’ difficulties living with spatially-induced racial illiteracy. Participants described how spatial isolation of growing up and living in predominantly White rural areas produced paradigms and experiences that severely limited their exposure to racially diverse social and cultural understandings. These participants spoke to their awareness of these limitations, however they openly struggled and were also unsure of how to learn more outside of their own limited White paradigms.

The participants that shared these perspectives described a rising awareness of how race and privilege influenced how their school systems perpetuated inequities, but they also openly struggled with how they could gain a better understanding of their privilege with almost no direct exposure to racially and culturally diverse students and parents. For example, some of the White rural aspiring leaders shared how their lack of racial literacy was influenced by their own educational experiences. Specifically, these participants noted how, up until recently with the racial reckoning of inequities exposed by the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement, they had never had to address how their race influenced their understanding of education in their predominantly white rural communities, let alone the US. One participant shared:

So race and privilege, to be honest up until the past, like, year and a half, two years, I don't think I've thought much about it. You know, I've grown up here in [this state]...and I don't think I had a lot of exposure to race. I've never really even heard of white privilege until like a year and a half ago when everything's kind of come to light...but I haven't really had many meaningful conversations about what it means for white privilege. So I don't really have a lot of experience with it.

Another participant shared a similar reflection on his experience growing up in a predominantly White, spatially isolated rural community that lacked visible racial and cultural diversity:

It's a tough area in our world and society growing up here [in this state], and I've traveled a bit over the years but I've never lived anywhere besides here...and so I haven't experienced a lot of culture compared to a lot of people.... You know, growing up in a small school there is not a ton of diversity...but to say I have been living outside of diversity would be false. And a lot of it I didn't realize until everybody began talking about this in the last few years.

These White rural aspiring school leaders who described their own rising awareness of racial illiteracy detail many of the lived experiences of White rural educators in the US, namely the ability to ignore the struggle of historically marginalized groups in US society. The difference with their experience, compared to say those who grew up in suburban or urban communities that had more racial diversity, or those who grew up in the rural US South where large segments of the rural population is Black, is that these US educators did not grow up with many – if any – opportunities to expand their understanding of racial diversity at the local population level. What results is a segment of rural educators who lack personal experiences to inform paradigms about historic inequities that are perpetuated through the US education system. For many, their spatially-induced racial illiteracy informs perspectives that do not prevent these aspiring school leaders from learning about how to make their education systems more



equitable, but it does require these educators to understand their limited understanding of racial inequities in the US and take charge of how they plan to inform their thinking of more equitable outcomes for their school system. As one participant shared, “I was probably in college before I realized that people continued to treat people of color differently...Like, it wasn't just one race being treated differently. It was a lot of people being treated different. And I think that's only amplifying now.”

### **Discussion and Implications**

The purpose of this study was to better understand how White rural aspiring school leaders in one educational leadership preparation program a predominantly White northern rural US state were able to reflect on their own leadership development as it relates to the creation of an equity lens to make their own school systems more inclusive. As described in the findings, cultural psychology and the connection to education can be described in three ways, specifically; 1) experiences of how race and social class inform leadership decisions; 2) solipsistic orientations about knowledge of the social world as it relates to privilege; and 3) contextual understanding of external factors such as spatial and racial isolation. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to better understand and analyze how White rural aspiring educational leaders are able to formulate new knowledge of more inclusive education systems and leadership in response to predominantly White rural social environments (Cohen, 2019; Heine, 2010; Kraus et al, 2012).

Through the application of the cultural psychology lens, this study offers important lessons as it relates to the development of rural school leaders and why this development is important in the context of the US in the 21st century (Parson et al., 2016; Superville, 2021). The first takeaway from this study highlights the important work of training rural educational leaders to engage in difficult conversations with predominantly White community members and stakeholders on the importance of addressing historical inequities due to the intersection of race and class. This includes unpacking their own racialized experiences, specifically addressing the moral and political ideologies they were exposed to while being raised in predominantly White rural communities (Leonardo, 2009). Data from this study shows how the commitment of rural educational leaders to create more equitable systems that address the historic marginalization of students and parents based on race is possible (Mealy, 2020), despite partisan politics and belief structures that reinforce inequitable education systems (Houston, 2021). As such, participants in this study display the importance of educational leadership development that produces moral and ethical educators who are able to identify oppressive educational practices, as well as apply equity belief structures that create more inclusive practices in the face of public and private pushback from the community as well as from family members.

Developing the ability to ‘unlearn’ their own ingrained solipsistic orientations about educational practices is a second important lesson to come out of this study. Specifically, valuing learning about racially sensitive topics in small groups with others, as well as listening to and reading about the lived experiences of people of color were seen as important steps in learning to apply new paradigms about education in the US (Cohen & Kitayama, 2019). In addition to the creation of intimate, trusting spaces that were relevant for their rural leadership development (Orphan & McClure, 2019), participants in this study also underscored the importance of their individual learning process to gain new knowledge about reimagining equitable education systems, particularly from the perspectives of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous authors and influencers. These spaces, both collective and individual, helped to move White rural aspiring school leaders away from solipsistic orientations of what education is, as well as deconstruct stereotypes about how rural education systems function (Gallo, 2020), and instead focused on developing new paradigms about what education in the rural US could be.

The third pertinent finding from this study is connected to the notion of the ‘racial contract’ developed by Mills (1997), which defines how space is controlled based on the concept of whiteness as a

passport, allowing White people to travel to all sections of the US without restriction and prohibits the movement of Black people and people of color more broadly outside of major cities as well as the rural South. However, this observation suggests White rural aspiring educational leaders are also negatively impacted by the notion of 'whiteness as the norm' (Lynch, 2018), as spatially-induced racial illiteracy negatively impacts the development of educational leaders. While it does not prevent White rural aspiring educational leaders from developing an equity lens, it does require that they acknowledge they have a limited understanding of racial inequities and intentionally take charge of their own development to become a more equitable and just leader. For those that come from predominantly White rural communities (Mann et al., 2021), this necessitates intentional development to better understand the struggles of historically marginalized groups in US society (Menakem, 2017).

Given the implications this study has for leadership development programs, specifically those in rural areas of the US, there are several recommendations to consider. If rural serving institutions that support educational leadership programs are to contribute to helping make the US more equitable and just, there must be intentional development of how to support rural school systems to become more inclusive, particularly as rural US schools continue to experience, and will continue to experience, rapid racial and ethnic diversification (Biddle & Mette, 2017). Related, there are profound policy and practice implications, particularly as rural educational leaders already face high levels of turnover (Rowland, 2017) – something that could be addressed through a rural racial literacy professional development network to provide ongoing support for rural principals to address inequities at the community level. Additionally, it is critical for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to help shift the paradigm from viewing rural places in the US as 'fly over' country (Tickamyer et al. 2017) and take part in deconstructing the racial contract by helping make rural places outside of the rural South truly open to all (Mills, 1997). Perhaps most important, as rural educational leadership preparation programs continue to evolve into the 21st century in the US, there must be increased critical analysis on how to prepare school leaders who are intellectually committed to affirm the culture of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students (Irby, 2021), while also acknowledge White people suffer from the racial contract as well due to spatial isolation that leads to a lack of diverse racial and cultural experiences.

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# What are We Talking About? Data Use Among Education Leaders of Change

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the International Council of Professors of Educational Leadership (ICPEL) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



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*In a time when fewer resources force school leaders to make critical decisions, the data-driven decision-making model continues to offer promise. This research project provides observations about factors used for decision making from 14 district leaders across five Iowa school districts. Placing these factors for decision making within the framework of a data driven decision making model provides insights for school leaders striving to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of decision making in their own districts. In doing so, educational leaders might ultimately implement educational change with greater effectiveness.*

**Keywords:** Data-driven decision-making, data driven, leadership

In an environment of increasingly limited resources, educational leaders must carefully consider a variety of factors when making decisions for their constituents. The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015) suggest that effective leaders use “relevant data” to develop and promote a vision for the school; however, no mention is made regarding the data sources school leaders should prioritize. As such, the data school leaders should use in making decisions for their constituents is uncertain. Mandinach and Schildkamp’s (2021) literature analysis identified five misconceptions of data use in schools, one of which is data being synonymous with standardized test results. Some critics have argued that institutions of higher education should increase their effort to help educators understand and use assessment data as a means of school improvement (Bocola & Boudett, 2015; Firestone & González, 2007). Others have suggested data sources should be more broadly defined to include student learning data, demographic data, school process data, and perception data (Lange et al., 2012; Mandinach et al., 2019). Based upon an analysis of school leaders’ practices in the use of data-driven decision making, Sun and colleagues (2016) assert that “clear guidelines regarding what data to use, when, by whom and how need to be developed and implemented in schools” (p. 109). On the other hand, a lack of clear guidelines and ineffective use of data can hinder positive activity by stakeholders (Jimerson et al., 2019).

Use of data in schools does not happen in isolation, but is instead influenced by a variety of system, organization, and localized factors (Roegman et al., 2018; Schildkamp, 2019). Gannon-Shilon and Schechter (2017) theorize school leaders may be influenced by “sense-making triggers” in which emotional reactions to events trigger a new understanding of previously ambiguous circumstances. To better understand school leaders’ use of data within school improvement, Schildkamp (2019) suggests a variety of methodologies are needed which include small-scale studies investigating educators’ sense-making.

This research seeks to identify influences of decision-making models among educational leaders in participating K-12 schools. Through semi-structured, phenomenological qualitative interviews with 14 district leaders, we aim to understand the factors influencing educational leaders in their school improvement efforts.

The primary research questions are...

1. What factors contribute to school improvement initiatives undertaken by educational leaders?
2. What types of data do educational leaders draw upon when making decisions for their constituents?
3. What motivates the decision-making models that educational leaders utilize in their school improvement efforts?

## **Literature Review**

The past 50 years rendered a variety of educational leadership models based upon the demands on school leaders and the changing reality in which they work. In the 1980s, the instructional leadership model emphasized developing the skills of teachers to increase their effectiveness with students (Hallinger et al., 2020). In the early 2000s, transformational leadership sought to provide a larger context of mission and vision while continuing the development of teacher effectiveness (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Sun & Leithwood, 2012). During this time, moral and ethical leadership, participative leadership, managerial leadership, contingent forms of school leadership (Leithwood & Duke 1999), as well as overarching leadership models were prevalent in the literature (Leithwood & Louis 2012; Waters et al., 2003).

The advent of *No Child Left Behind* marked a turning point in educational leadership. With a heightened level of accountability in student performance on standardized testing, Leithwood and Lewis (2012) recognized the increased emphasis on data use in leadership and student learning. Leithwood and

Lewis (2012) analyzed various issues related to leadership, data use, and increased student achievement. While numerous aspects of data-based decision making and the direct connection to student learning remained unclear, high data use schools did tend to correlate to higher student achievement. Drawing upon Ikemoto and Marsh's (2007) framework that considered who used data, the sources of data, and the complexity of data analysis, Leithwood and Lewis (2012) found that school leaders set the tone for effective data use in their districts. While data collected tended to focus on problems in student learning rather than causes or potential solutions, those schools that drew upon data sources beyond merely student performance tended to provide more effective solutions to their educational problems (Leithwood & Lewis, 2012). More recently, Datnow and Park (2018) proposed school leaders balance the use of data in schools to ensure equitable opportunities and outcomes for students. Indeed, Schildkamp (2019) concluded one of the most important enablers and barriers to using data to improve teaching and learning is leadership.

As the use of data among educational leaders grew, so too did the need to identify leadership tasks to further analyze the types of data used for those respective tasks. Sergis and Sampson, (2016) identified 11 different leader tasks:

- T1) learning process monitoring: identifying types of instructional practices and processes used
- T2) learning process evaluation: analysis aimed at improving the teaching and learning process of the school
- T3) learner performance monitoring: micro- and meso-level data related to learners' academic performance
- T4) learner performance evaluation: diagnostic and formative data to monitor progress during the learning process
- T5) curriculum planning: issues related to current or alternative curriculum
- T6) teaching staff management: teaching performance (processes and competencies) and operations (attendance, demographics, payroll)
- T7) teaching staff professional development: identification of teaching staff competencies and shortcomings
- T8) district stakeholder accountability: formulating and sustaining communication channels with stakeholders
- T9) infrastructural resource management: hardware and software equipment
- T10) financial resource management: budget, funding, and accounting
- T11) learner data management: overall considerations of learner data (demographics, academic background - Sergis & Sampson, 2016, pp. 152-53).

Educational leaders undoubtedly deal with a significant amount of data. This framework of 11 tasks provides leaders a means to identify and distinguish the various types of data and thereby specify more clearly the educational measures under consideration.

Sergis and Sampson's (2016) extensive quantitative study analyzed data use across 70 school leadership decision support systems (SL-DSS) to provide insights regarding data-based decision making in any district. Citing Marsh and Farrell (2014), the study reinforced the reality that time, availability and quality of data, and the competency of school leaders to work with this data hindered effective district decision making. While school leaders focused most directly on student performance data as mandated by external agencies in this study, comparatively less data was collected and analyzed regarding teaching practice (Sergis & Sampson, 2016). The study raises an intriguing question: What types of data *should* leaders be gathering and using when making decisions?

Sun, Johnson, and Przybylski (2016) addressed similar questions regarding leadership tasks and data use in their analysis of 60 studies of data use by principals. Their data-driven leadership model identified four leadership domains with 18 various practices. While they found that data use among

principals remained inconsistent, Sun and colleagues (2016) concluded that educational leaders might increase student achievement by focusing on key leadership domains of data-based goal setting: developing teachers' decision-making capacity, building a data-wise culture in schools, and improving instruction based on data. The eleven leadership tasks from the Sergis and Sampson (2016) study, along with the four domains of leadership from the Sun, Johnson, and Przybylski (2016) study serve as the conceptual framework for this research.

As the literature and framework illustrate, data use and decision making continue to be important issues for educational leaders. Previous studies analyzed the use of data in New York City schools, Australia, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and other jurisdictions (as cited in Sun et al., 2016). To our knowledge, this is a unique study in Iowa leadership and data use in decision making. In addition, the recent implementation of the state's Teacher Leadership and Compensation Grant to build capacity for data use among instructional leaders brings a unique component to the current need for data in decision making. Through this grant, every Iowa school district is allocated per pupil funding for the unique purpose of developing collaboration and leadership capacity within teachers to support the school's improvement efforts (Iowa Department of Education, 2021). Our research applied the decision-making framework described above to 14 educational leaders in five Iowa school districts while considering the school improvement initiatives underway in each of those districts.

## **Method**

A purposive sample (Merriam, 2015) was generated by extending an initial email invitation to five superintendents in five Iowa school districts. Researchers extended invitations to superintendents of these districts based upon size (1,000 to 1,500 students), proximity, and some familiarity with district initiatives and those administrators (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Superintendents assisted with recruitment by forwarding the invitation to participate to the educational leaders within their districts and thereby increasing randomness (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Ultimately, 14 educational leaders (superintendents, district office administrators, and principals) from five Iowa school districts provided qualitative data through phenomenological, semi-structured interviews (Seidman, 2013). Interviews provided insight into the phenomenological decision-making experience of each educational leader. Responsive interviews provided an effective method to capture the perceptions, thoughts, and observations of initiatives currently underway in each context (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Table 1 provides an overview of each school district's demographics and participating administrators.

Researchers conducted the first two interviews together, to verify questions and general format prior to conducting further individuals separately. Researchers asked participants reasonable, semi-structured questions (Brown & Danaher, 2019) about current district initiatives, as well as data used to consider, implement, and evaluate current initiatives. Ten interviews were conducted face to face, with four conducted through Zoom.

Researchers digitally recorded, and then transcribed, all interviews to provide hard-copy records for coding and analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2021; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Upon the completion of interview transcription, member checks provided participants the opportunity for participants to review transcripts and verify their thoughts and address any areas of concern (Brown & Danaher, 2019; Candela, 2019). Participant responses were axial coded based upon common elements from the interviews (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The two authors first completed coding independently, then collaborated to compare and verify coding methods (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

Following the model of Sergis and Sampson (2016), researchers also tallied data points from each interview as an indicator of the various leadership tasks with which leaders engaged. Using the 11



leadership tasks cited above, researchers gleaned transcript data to identify various tasks referenced by district leaders and the respective tasks of emphasis within each district. See tables two through six for these leadership task tallies.

**Table 1**

*District Demographics*

District	Participants	# of students (approximate)	Caucasian students (%)	Students qualifying for free/reduced lunch (%)	4 year Graduation Rate (%)
District A	S, HS, ML	1,000	94%	28%	97.9%
District B	S, CO	1,500	95%	25%	96.3%
District C	S, HS, E	1,500	80%	54.5%	91.5%
District D	S, CO	1,200	60%	35%	95.5%
District E	S, HS, ML, E	1,200	90%	60%	85%

Statistics from 2020 Iowa Department of Education School Performance Profiles.

S = superintendent; HS = high school administrator; ML = middle level administrator; E = elementary administrator; CO = central office administrator

### Findings

While all participants cited a variety of factors affecting decision making across their districts, each district tended to focus on certain factors more than others. The following narratives briefly describe each district, the participants, and motivating factors within their educational context.

#### District A

All three leaders at District A frequently mentioned school improvement foci that were being implemented based upon *influencers close to home*. For example, the superintendent highlighted partnering with three neighboring school districts to share services and provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate. District A leaders preferred to partner with “people we meet” such as area superintendents and principals to understand what is working in *their districts* rather than lean into the state department of education or other sources of school improvement guidance. One principal described this mindset as “knowing that so many other schools were already having this in place...was probably one of the biggest drivers of what we can do.” In turn, administrators admitted they were not concerned with state assessment or other standardized data because they “did not tell the full story.” Volunteer teams of

teachers often formed for the purpose of working through a change initiated by building or district leadership.

**Table 2**

*District A Leadership Tasks*

	S	HS	ML
T1 Learning Process Monitoring	1	4	2
T2 Learning Process Evaluation	3	3	1
T3 Learner Performance Monitoring	7	2	3
T4 Learner Performance Evaluation	4	2	4
T5 Curriculum Planning	2	3	1
T6 Teaching Staff Management	7	4	5
T7 Teaching Staff PD	7	5	2
T8 District Stakeholder Accountability	3	5	2
T9 Infrastructural Resource Management	2	1	
T10 Financial Resource Management	6		1
T11 Learner Data Management			1

Table 2 reflects district leader focus on T6 – Teaching Staff Management, and T7 – Teaching Staff Professional Development. Throughout the interviews, District A leaders addressed their ongoing efforts to develop collaboration to increase teacher effectiveness in working with the whole child. Collaborative efforts included interaction with external districts and educational service agencies, as well as internal discussions among teams of administrators, instructional coaches, guidance counselors, and teachers.

**District B**

Both participants – the superintendent and the director of curriculum and instruction – referred to their long-standing district vision and school improvement model. This model, often referred to as “The District B Wheel,” provided the foundation for data-driven decision making guided by instructional coaches, then implemented through teachers. Following the recent retirement of a long-tenured superintendent, the existing district model provided the new district leader the framework for her work in five priority areas as defined by the school board. The superintendent was keenly aware of demographic changes within the district that may lead to attendance center re-locations or closures. In addition, the increase of young families in several of the district’s communities was creating the potential for additional pre-K services and corresponding classroom space. Regular meetings with civic leaders and district families helped gather information and share potential plans for more effective communication with all constituents. The director of curriculum and instruction spoke enthusiastically about building capacity among teacher teams and their analysis of instructional success using student data.

**Table 3**

*District B Leadership Tasks*

	S	CO
T1 Learning Process Monitoring	5	3
T2 Learning Process Evaluation	4	9
T3 Learner Performance Monitoring	6	7
T4 Learner Performance Evaluation	2	5
T5 Curriculum Planning	3	1

T6 Teaching Staff Management	5	4
T7 Teaching Staff PD	2	4
T8 District Stakeholder Accountability	7	2
T9 Infrastructural Resource Management	4	1
T10 Financial Resource Management	6	
T11 Learner Data Management	8	2

Table 3 highlights the different leadership tasks and focus for leaders within a district. The superintendent was in tune with district demographics and communication among numerous constituents within the district (T11 – Learner Data Management and T8 – District Stakeholder Accountability respectively). In contrast, the director of curriculum and instruction focused more on teacher teams that analyzed student performance data to improve instruction (T2 – Learning Process Evaluation) and various factors affecting learner performance (T3).

### District C

All three educational leaders spoke consistently about *system-ness*. In his second year in the district, the well-read and energetic superintendent invested time developing the mission, vision, and values, striving to establish systemic structures based upon a distributive leadership model. Extensive observation data and consistent communication of mission, vision, and values with all constituents helped build capacity at all levels of learning in the district. The two principals were eager to provide several recent and practical examples of the distributed model that included asking questions of teachers and students, reminding those involved of parameters within the decision-making matrix, and then encouraging initiative. By increasing the responsibility and accountability of individuals with whom they worked directly, administrators appeared to remove responsibilities from their direct purview, while distributing leadership to other actors. While the elementary principal admittedly worked more with academic data, both building administrators acknowledged the importance of student data applicable to their respective attendance centers.

**Table 4**

#### *District C Leadership Tasks*

	S	HS	E
T1 Learning Process Monitoring	5	1	4
T2 Learning Process Evaluation	8		4
T3 Learner Performance Monitoring	4	8	9
T4 Learner Performance Evaluation	3	3	4
T5 Curriculum Planning	3	2	
T6 Teaching Staff Management	7	9	4
T7 Teaching Staff PD	12	12	8
T8 District Stakeholder Accountability	8	4	5
T9 Infrastructural Resource Management	1		
T10 Financial Resource Management	1		
T11 Learner Data Management	5	1	

Table 4 highlights all three district leaders' emphasis on building an infrastructure that develops professional capital among teachers (T7). This shared leadership model emphasized increased capacity for meeting student needs unique to the community (T3), while simultaneously being sensitive to constituents within the community (T8).

## District D

Keen awareness of student demographics and implementation of state initiatives with the guidance of the regional education service agency marked important factors in district decision making. The superintendent and director of instructional services spoke to realities within the district about limited opportunities for graduates and current state initiatives that resonated with the social-emotional needs with their stakeholders. The superintendent highlighted greater awareness of school board accountability and resource management, while encouraging personal and professional development for his administrative team. The director of instructional services spoke of her enthusiasm for building capacity in teachers through district instructional coaches. A highly communicative administrative team worked effectively to encourage fidelity of initiatives in teacher teams. Like District B, the director of instructional services reiterated the district's focus on building capacity among teachers as a primary function of her role.

**Table 5**

*District D Leadership Tasks*

	S	CO
T1 Learning Process Monitoring	3	
T2 Learning Process Evaluation		3
T3 Learner Performance Monitoring	8	7
T4 Learner Performance Evaluation	1	6
T5 Curriculum Planning		4
T6 Teaching Staff Management	4	4
T7 Teaching Staff PD	3	10
T8 District Stakeholder Accountability	5	2
T9 Infrastructural Resource Management	1	1
T10 Financial Resource Management	3	3
T11 Learner Data Management	3	1

Like District B, data from Table 5 highlights the different focal points between the superintendent and the director of curriculum and instruction. While both district leaders related thorough knowledge of community factors affecting their student population (T3), the superintendent used this knowledge with the school board (T8) while the director of instructional services focused on professional development for teachers (T7).

## District E

Leaders at District E, while aware of state mandates and policies, decisions appeared to be motivated by local considerations such as staff culture, office referral data, and teacher-initiated changes. District's E's instructional leadership team, separate from a district operations team, sat on top of the hierarchy, while building leadership teams with rotating representatives provided ample staff voice into decision making. For example, the high school principal commented, "Very few times do I make large-

scale decisions without the input of that [building leadership] team or that group gives me input and I bring it to our [district] instructional [leadership] team...”

**Table 6**

*District E Leadership Tasks*

	S	HS	ML	E
T1 Learning Process Monitoring	2	4	2	2
T2 Learning Process Evaluation		4	4	
T3 Learner Performance Monitoring	10	13	9	6
T4 Learner Performance Evaluation	8	3	8	3
T5 Curriculum Planning	1	5	7	7
T6 Teaching Staff Management	7	4	2	3
T7 Teaching Staff PD	7	4	12	4
T8 District Stakeholder Accountability	2	5	9	5
T9 Infrastructural Resource Management		4	1	6
T10 Financial Resource Management	3	4		
T11 Learner Data Management		4	4	

Like District D, Table 6 reflects the keen awareness of District E leaders with the demographic impact on teachers and learners (T3). And, like the director of instructional services from District D, District E principals similarly worked toward more effective collaboration through teacher teams (T7) and community engagement (T8) to address those demographic distinctives.

### Discussion

Our analysis generated three overarching themes. First, interviews and subsequent analysis suggested that two district decision making models were centered upon the district mission, vision, and values while three districts responded to local influences such as community needs or schools in local proximity. Second, by using the Sergis and Sampson (2016) model to tally leadership tasks mentioned in the interviews, researchers could begin to see focal points within each district. A third theme identified through data analysis was the tendency toward qualitative influencers in decision making.

Examples of prioritizing decisions within the mission, vision, and values include District B in which leaders frequently referred to their “wheel” model when considering both academic initiatives and capital improvement projects. Within District C, leaders were quick to articulate the freedom within fences in which staff were encouraged to operate if it was within the purview of the district’s overall mission. While ultimate authority for many decisions in these two districts remained in the hands of educational leaders, their staff and constituents appeared to understand their role in providing meaningful and timely input. The emphasis on staff input evident in both districts aligns with Sun and colleagues (2016) domain of developing teachers’ decision-making capacity. On the contrary, the remaining three districts depended upon influencers close to home, yet outside of their school walls. Whereas District D leaned upon the guidance from an intermediate service agency, District A leaders found value in observing what was working in school systems around them before choosing to adopt these initiatives themselves. Within these three remaining districts, there appeared to be goals or initiatives established that were not necessarily based upon data or the input of staff, which runs contrary to two domains suggested by Sun and colleagues (2016).

In addition to observing the tendency of district decision making to be mission focused or externally initiated, researchers also identified leadership tasks from Sergis and Sampson (2016) mentioned more frequently in individual districts as well as among different leaders within those districts. All district leaders readily cited awareness of demographic information and the impact of those demographics on students. In addition to this contextual awareness, however, some district leaders focused more on professional development and capacity building (T7), while others focused on building networks with constituents (T8). This second theme supports the ability to, if not the importance of, identifying the leadership tasks around which conversations take place within school districts (Sergis & Sampson, 2016; Sun et al., 2016). The results of this study align with previous research suggesting data use in schools is influenced by a variety of system, organization, and localized factors (Roegman et al., 2018; Schildkamp, 2019). Finally, the participants in this study were all from rural schools, which may enhance their awareness of localized expectations (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018).

The third theme identified through data analysis suggested that educational leaders across all five schools in our investigation expressed a preference, and perhaps a dependence, upon qualitative influencers. As such, the results of the current study are consistent with prevailing literature suggesting that data-driven decision making continues to evolve. Recent studies highlight educational leaders' increasing, yet moderate use of quantitative data to improve their schools (Sun et al., 2016), a need to enhance their capacity to make data-driven decisions (Pak & Desimone, 2019) and models they may consider to do so (Marsh & Farrell, 2014). Yet, the district models, whether mission-motivated or locally influenced, suggest these educational leaders appear to be most comfortable basing their decisions upon qualitative rather than quantitative measures. While quantitative, data-driven, decision-making has been framed as "the new instructional leadership" in schools (Halverson et al., 2007), the influences educational leaders shared in the current study were often far from it, further distancing these school leaders from the data-based goal setting and data-wise culture domains proposed by Sun et al. (2016). The results of the current study support Mandinach and Schildkamp's (2021) assertion that data used in schools is not synonymous with standardized test results. Furthermore, these districts drawing upon a balance of data sources beyond student learning metrics may be able to identify more effective solutions to their local problems (Leithwood & Lewis, 2012).

### **Significance of the Study**

Current emphasis on data use and decision-making raise important issues among educational leaders. Factors affecting decisions, and data sources to inform those factors rank high among those issues. This unique study in Iowa leadership and data use in decision making highlighted the different influences in five districts, the leadership tasks more readily identified in those districts, and the tendency toward qualitative influencers. The recent implementation of the state's Teacher Leadership and Compensation Grant to build capacity for data use among instructional leaders was prominent in use, or in the types of leadership tasks outlined in each district.

While limited to only five Iowa school districts compared to the analysis of district decision making across 70 school districts (Sergis & Sampson, 2016) or 60 studies of principals and data use (Sun et al., 2016), this study does provide educational leaders the opportunity to focus on two talking points: 1) What tasks demand decisions in my role as educational leader? And 2) What data do leaders consider when making decisions?

This study may foster discussion among educational leaders regarding data use and decision making in their local contexts, while raising the awareness of individuals within each district specifically identified to deal with data. While additional research should consider understanding the responsibilities

unique to various district positions as well as the need for district leaders who focus specifically on data use, discussions across districts will only move us closer to desired student achievement goals.

### **Conclusion**

A variety of factors contribute to the school improvement initiative efforts undertaken by the educational leaders in this study. Several district decision-making models were centered upon the district mission, vision, and values while three districts responded to local influences such as community needs or schools in local proximity. Although previous accountability laws such as NCLB and ESSA have enhanced stakeholders' attention towards accountability in student performance on standardized testing, the data school leaders are utilizing to inform their improvement efforts may not overlap. Furthermore, previous leadership domains such as data-based goal setting and building a data-wise culture may be less important when compared to developing teachers' decision-making capacity. Clarifying processes and conversations in local districts will identify the data currently used in decision making, while moving toward more effective use of data to improve student achievement.

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# Do I Really Belong Here?: EdD Student Perceptions of a Poster Gallery Walk to Mitigate Imposter Syndrome and Match with a Dissertation Chair

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the International Council of Professors of Educational Leadership (ICPEL) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



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*The doctorate in educational leadership at XYZ University prepares leaders to make positive changes in their communities and organizations. An important aspect of the program requires students to complete a Dissertation in Practice related to a problem identified within their educational setting. Students begin work on the dissertation during their first semester and solidify the focus during the second semester, when they are matched with a chairperson. This type of academic endeavor can lead to feelings related to imposter syndrome, including anxiety and fearfulness related to their academic abilities. Faculty at XYZ University have implemented an innovative active learning experience, a poster presentation and gallery walk, to mitigate imposter syndrome and foster initial relationships between students and their dissertation chairperson. In a survey of participants, students confirmed that the gallery walk experience decreased feelings related to imposter syndrome and left them feeling supported and confident in their capabilities to complete a dissertation.*

**Keywords:** *Educational Leadership; Dissertation in Practice; Imposter Syndrome; Poster Gallery Walk; Dissertation Chair*

XYZ University's (XYZ) EdD program in Educational Leadership focuses on preparing leaders to make a positive difference in the lives of their organization and community members through the collection and evaluation of information from their educational settings. XYZ's three-year EdD program is influenced by the Carnegie Project for the Education Doctorate (CPED); an important aspect of the program involves the use of meaningful and interactive activities that engage students and challenge them to view themselves as valued practitioners. The activities provide students the opportunity to direct aspects of their doctoral studies and experiences, while encouraging them to build supportive relationships with faculty in the department and the other members of their cohort. The relationship between EdD students and their chairperson can be vital to their success in completing degree requirements, specifically the dissertation (Neale-McFall & Ward, 2015). Students beginning doctoral-level academic programs, particularly as adult learners, typically experience some aspects of imposter syndrome. Building strong relationships with faculty and other students can decrease the feelings of imposter syndrome that may prevent students from achieving success in their program (Chapman, 2017).

The EdD program at XYZ involves the completion of an action-research type dissertation in practice (DiP) supported by a faculty member within the Department of Educational Leadership. Students make the initial identification of their "problem of practice" (PoP) during the first semester in the EdD program. The PoP selected from their educational setting leads to a more developed topic for the DiP study, and faculty in the department with expertise related to the student's PoP may be identified as a potential dissertation chairperson. To provide students with the greatest likelihood for success, a new assignment and accompanying activity allowing students to be directly involved in selecting a chairperson were developed. This activity was intended to provide students with the opportunity to feel more secure with the selection of their PoP and DiP topic, as well as begin to build a relationship with their faculty chairperson as early as the second semester in the EdD program. This activity also allowed for students to engage with all faculty in the department, as well as others in the cohort, and receive constructive feedback related to their DiP topic.

The qualitative study presented in this article showcases the way faculty in the XYZ EdD program developed and implemented this innovative assignment and activity. As part of the activity, a new dissertation chair selection process was utilized that resulted in a decrease in feelings related to imposter syndrome, as well as strengthened relationships between students and faculty.

### **Relevant Literature**

With student completion rates in university doctoral programs across the US as low as 40% (Xu, 2014; Zhou & Okahana, 2016), researchers continue to seek ways to address this concern. Research has identified various factors that play a role in the low completion rates, including the design of doctoral programs, influences from student integration (Tinto, 1988), and supportiveness of faculty and advisors (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Barnett et al., 2000; Hanson et al., 2020; Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Stallone, 2011). In an effort to address some of these concerns, the EdD program in Educational Leadership at XYZ has identified ways to provide support for the students from the time they are admitted through the completion of their final dissertation defense. The qualitative study described in this article provides the results of some of these efforts, specifically focusing on innovative program design, student integration, and faculty support, stemming from an assignment requiring students to create and present a poster for their selected DiP topic during their second semester in the program.

XYZ offers an EdD in Educational Leadership that is completed in three years, including dissertation. Recognizing that the students are full-time practitioners, work on the dissertation requirement begins during the first semester, when students identify the focus for their DiP, and continues throughout the program. Because the EdD at XYZ prepares educational leaders to become

change agents in their communities, the EdD program seeks to provide students with skills to identify situations within their workspace that would benefit from research and a plan for change. Students become scholarly practitioners as a result of their participation in EdD programs, like the program at XYZ, that place an emphasis on collecting and evaluating data leading to positive changes in their communities. Upon completion of the program, students can demonstrate collaboration and communication skills, the ability to work with diverse communities, and relationships/networks created within the field (Boyce, 2012; Hoffman & Perry, 2016).

### **Theoretical Framework**

A variety of pedagogical techniques and learning strategies are utilized in doctoral programs to provide students with the best opportunity for successful completion of the degree. Students in the EdD program are practitioners who excel in their fields and are seeking additional tools to utilize as administrators and scholarly practitioners. Active learning theory offers strategies that provide learning experiences that are most similar to situations practitioners encounter in their educational settings. These learning experiences prompt students to think critically, work collaboratively, and connect learning to practical situations (TeKippe, 2017). Bonwell and Eison (1991) defined active learning strategies as “instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing” (p. 5). In 2003, Fink expanded the definition of active learning to include three components: (a) students receiving content, (b) experiences to include both “doing” and “observing,” and (c) reflection and discussion with others. The activities that can be categorized as active learning require students to do higher order thinking, as well as reflect on their own learning (McConnell et al., 2017). Students participating in active learning are consciously engaged in building, testing, and refining mental models (Joel, 2007).

An example of an active learning instructional practice, the gallery walk, has been shown to result in increased student learning and a reduction in program attrition (McConnell et al., 2017). The gallery walk is an active learning strategy that allows for stations to be located throughout the room and students stop at each location, as if in an art gallery. Researchers posit that the gallery walk strategy can be a welcome change to typical sedentary class work and can lead to an increase in discussion and interaction (McConnell et al., 2017). In the typical use of this type of learning strategy, the students are asked to move throughout the room; however, in the process adopted by the EdD at XYZ, students remain stationary next to their posters and the department faculty circulate throughout the room discussing with the students. This structure allows for the presentation of “practitioner wisdom” on the part of the students related to their identified PoP (Francek, 2006; McConnell et al., 2017), as well as an opportunity for faculty feedback and suggestions. Students within the cohort are also provided the opportunity to circulate during the gallery walk, fostering peer discussion with their colleagues.

Vygotsky’s theoretical work related to learning development indicates that gallery walks are a pedagogical technique that result in students actively learning with the support of their faculty and peers (1978). Gallery walks also meet Fink’s requirements necessary for categorization as active learning (2003). Prior to the gallery walk, students take part in a course with a faculty member where they do research on their selected dissertation topic. Students then take the research and create a poster displaying the specific aspects of their proposed study. The actual gallery walk allows for discussion with faculty and peers and provides students with the opportunity to reflect on their identified dissertation topic and focus.

Although the intention of active learning is to increase feelings of support related to learning concepts, students have reported significant anxiety in completing an active learning-based task (England et al., 2019). The gallery walk implemented for EdD students at XYZ considered the students’ anxiety and

feelings related to imposter syndrome and was designed to ensure a comfortable, collaborative experience resulting in the creation of supportive relationships with faculty and peers. It is this type of support that can determine whether or not a student will be successful in their doctorate program.

## **Imposter Syndrome**

The majority of the students who pursue the EdD have already established themselves as leaders in their work settings and communities, indicating their level of experience in the field (Buss, 2014). Unfortunately, this tends to result in a substantial gap in academic efforts and participation in educational research settings. This gap can lead to feelings of fraud and a lack of confidence regarding their experience and skills as both a practitioner and researcher, a phenomenon typically referred to as imposter syndrome (Chapman, 2017; Clance & Imes, 1978; Crusan, 2014). Making the decision to pursue an academic endeavor of this level comes with significant risk and can require an identity change. Students fear facing judgement from both the faculty in the program, as well as their peers. Identifying a way to discuss academic works with professors and colleagues while receiving constructive feedback in a more comfortable, supportive setting is an important goal for any new pedagogical concepts implemented within an EdD program.

A focus on the support provided by the student's dissertation chair is another factor identified throughout the literature as having an effect on the success of the student and their sense of belonging in the EdD program. Kamler and Thomson (2006) indicate that dissertation writing is one of the major causes of anxiety for students and can lead to the self-sabotaging behaviors indicative of the imposter syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978; Crusan, 2014; Gardiner & Kearns, 2012). Awareness of the possibility for these behaviors to manifest while seeking the EdD degree can result in a more dedicated focus on coaching and advising on behalf of the faculty dissertation chair (LaFrance et al., 2020). The relationship between the student and the chairperson is such that it can be referred to as a "high-stakes, intimate tutorial – possibly the most crucial educational relationship of a student's life" (Pare, 2011, p. 59).

## **Student Support**

A positive relationship between dissertation chair and doctoral candidate has been identified as one of the key factors associated with doctoral degree completion (LaFrance et al., 2020; Stallone, 2011; Storms et al., 2011). This relationship includes regular communication, constructive feedback, consistency, and personal connections with students (Holmes et al., 2014; Rademaker et al., 2016). Students want to know that their dissertation chair is committed to them as a researcher and evidence of this commitment can be seen through a willingness to dedicate time, patience, and energy to supervise doctoral students (LaFrance et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2018). Although the dissertation chair is working with the student specifically to advise on their dissertation research, it has been suggested that effective and supportive mentoring is just as important as assistance with research and content expertise (Jairam & Kahl, 2012; LaFrance et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2018).

Dissertation chairs are paired with doctoral students in a variety of ways; some institutions may assign students and chairs, while others may allow the student to work with the faculty to identify the most appropriate person to serve as their chairperson. In cases where students are allowed to identify their own dissertation chair, there are specific criteria that students typically find desirable. Lovitts (2001) found that the amount of time, location of interactions, and quantity of assistance influenced students' decisions and ultimately their satisfaction with the relationship. Additionally, research showed that students who did not complete their doctorate degree were six times more likely to have been assigned a chairperson rather than given the option to make their own selection (Lovitts, 2001; Neale-McFall &

Ward, 2015). Neale-McFall and Ward (2015) received similar results in a study regarding satisfaction with dissertation chair selection. Students who selected their own chairperson, rather than having one assigned, reported higher levels of satisfaction with the relationship. These students who described themselves as more satisfied selected a chairperson based on the faculty member's work style and reputation related to their ability to collaborate. Students advised they were also seeking a chairperson with a similar work ethic, as well as a positive personality match. Specific behaviors, including patience, advocacy, and timely feedback, were also important in the students' determination of a chairperson for their dissertation (Neale-McFall & Ward, 2015).

In addition to the importance of the dissertation chair on student success, the relationship that students build with colleagues in their cohort can provide a level of support that the dissertation chair is not able to in their role. The other students in the program are experiencing similar situations and also dealing with issues related to work-life balance and imposter syndrome. The need for candidate socialization and support systems in doctoral programs exists due to the isolation, stress, doubt, and exhaustion that doctoral students experience (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Berman & Ames, 2015; Jairam & Kahl, 2011; Stubb et al., 2011). Additionally, research has suggested that use of the cohort model results in improved academic performance and increased interpersonal relationships (Barnett et al., 2000; Jackson & Kelley, 2002). It is also noted that students' sense of belonging increases and imposter syndrome decreases with the use of the cohort model to provide this additional support structure (Barnett et al., 2000; Holmes et al., 2014; Stubb et al., 2011).

### **Academic Poster Presentations**

As research has indicated, many students in doctoral programs struggle with imposter syndrome. In addition to the focus on the relationship with the chairperson, as well as the importance of student integration within the program and their individual cohort, research has also suggested that specific pedagogical concepts and program design can lead to greater success for students, specifically in the dissertation process (Casanave, 2019; Chapman, 2017; Gardiner & Kearns, 2012; Kamler & Thomson, 2006). It is important that students learn to develop, focus, and discuss their research related to their identified topic for the DiP, and a poster presentation is a specific tool that can be used to aid students in achieving these goals. Poster presentations may be similar to a gallery walk in that both include aspects of active learning; however, standard poster presentations may lack the required interaction with others regarding the information being presented, as well as the personal reflection by the presenter. Poster presentations are typically seen at academic conferences, where researchers showcase information in a visual format in this academic setting (Akister et al., 2000; Lynch, 2018; Samuel et al., 2014). In some cases, it is expected that the poster can stand alone and present the necessary information regarding the individual study; yet, in other settings the presenter will have the opportunity to expand upon the information presented on the poster and answer questions about the research (MacIntosh-Murray, 2007).

A typical poster presenting academic research represents a visual and abbreviated version of a research study or paper through text, graphics, color, and even speech and gestures if there is the opportunity for a discussion between the viewer and the presenter. The content of the poster itself may include standard research information with an introduction, methods, results, and conclusions (Lynch, 2018; MacIntosh-Murray, 2007). Poster presentations reflect specific details and results of a research study shared both visually and orally among colleagues in an academic setting but may also be considered as part of the curriculum for graduate students in some academic programs (MacIntosh-Murray, 2007). Students in this capacity must collect and understand the knowledge associated with the research, but they must also be able to learn the academic language and ways of communicating that knowledge,

including the written, visual, and oral methods that make up academic discourse (Blakeslee, 1997; MacIntosh-Murray, 2007).

The posters and the subsequent presentation or discussion with each student can be considered another form of academic communication, similar to conference papers, journal articles, and grant proposals, and a way to share this information. The academic skills required to prepare and showcase information in this format are immediately transferable to the workplace, while providing students with the opportunity to discuss their intended research with others in their field (Akister et al., 2000; Lynch, 2018). At times, posters may be presented while research is still in progress, which can require students to provide the information identified thus far, but also theorize as to the final results of the study.

Research has shown that participation in this type of educational activity has positive influences on doctoral student learning and engagement, which can lead to a better understanding of the process of conducting research, as well as the larger community of scholarly researchers (Coryell & Murray, 2014). The poster gallery walk activity also results in increased confidence and motivation regarding the students' individual dissertation topics and their interest as developing researchers (Coryell & Murray, 2014). Ultimately, students who experience an increase in confidence and motivation may also show a decrease in the level of imposter syndrome they feel as doctoral students, leading to academic success and timely program completion. The study described herein utilizes aspects of both the gallery walk and the poster presentation to provide students with the best opportunity for success.

### **Methods**

EdD students at XYZ University are provided assignments as part of their coursework in their first semester of enrollment that are designed to support student agency by helping them identify the initial concept and available data to justify their DiP. These assignments are then utilized in the second semester of enrollment to guide students' efforts in gathering research literature relative to their problem of practice that serves as the topic for their study. In order to further develop students' level of comfort and understanding of their DiP to this point, EdD students are expected to create a poster highlighting some of their products from the first semester assignments. A template for the poster is provided to students. See Figure 1.

**Figure 1**  
Dissertation in Practice Poster Template

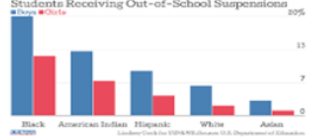
## TITLE (Name & Frame Problem of Practice)

Your Name, EdD Candidate


### The PoP in Context

What is your Problem of Practice?

Include data from your site that validates that your PoP is grounded. How does it address issues of equity or social justice?




Share about the setting of your study and the population your study is focused upon. Feel free to include a photo, chart, visual.



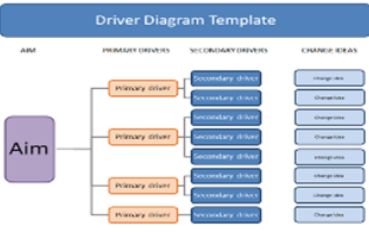
### Root Cause & Asset Analysis

Summarize in 1-2 sentences indicating root causes of PoP, with emphasis on equity and/or social justice.



### Driver Analysis

Summarize driver diagram in 1-2 sentences indicating potential solution to your PoP that would make a positive difference.



### [Choice of...]

Choose one of the following to include a visual display of the direction you are taking with your literature review:

- A literature map showing with your intended literature review topics and subtopics, OR
- A table or graphic organizer with a list of your intended literature review topics/subtopics, as well as a few keys articles relevant to your intended study, OR
- An overview of your theoretical framework and/or conceptual model upon which your intended study is based.

### Collaborative Inquiry Partners

- How do you plan to engage CIPs throughout?
- Why does this study matter to you & your CIPs?

The posters are displayed as part of a gallery walk whereby all EdD students are provided the opportunity to meet and learn about the research interests and expertise of the entire faculty of the XYZ Educational Leadership Department, as well as alumni of the program and current students further into their study. The faculty are expected to provide coaching and feedback to the EdD students during the gallery walk to help them improve and advance their DiP study. The gallery walk also provides students with the opportunity to practice articulating their study in an academic setting.

Upon completion of the poster gallery walk, a meal is served to EdD students, faculty, and guests to provide further collaboration and networking opportunities. EdD students are then asked to confidentially rank their preferences for whom they would like to serve as the chairperson for their DiP study from among the faculty they met and interacted with during the gallery walk. This written ranking is provided by each student to the EdD program coordinator. Simultaneously, faculty are asked to confidentially list the EdD students whom they feel they would be best qualified - based on research interest and expertise - to support as chairperson for their respective DiP study. This list from faculty is also provided to the EdD program coordinator, who compares both sets of lists to create a match of EdD student and chairperson that includes input from both respective parties. Following the aforementioned meal, chairperson assignments are announced so that students are provided an opportunity to meet with their newly assigned chairperson to discuss next steps in the DiP development. Thus far the process has been conducted with two cohorts, and there has not been an instance where a student was not matched successfully with a faculty member.



The purpose of this qualitative study, conducted by two faculty members within the XYZ EdD program, was to determine if a DiP poster presentation and gallery walk, followed by the subsequent matching with a dissertation chair during the second semester of an EdD program, provides students with a sense of support and affirmation of their participation in the EdD program. As such the following questions guided the inquiry:

1. What were the effects of preparing and presenting a poster detailing a student's proposed DiP during their first semester in an EdD program?
2. What were the effects of matching with a dissertation chair during the 2nd semester on a student's sense of belonging?

A convenience sample drawn from the EdD students at XYZ was utilized. In all, the population from which the sample was drawn consisted of 20 pre-candidacy doctoral students in their second semester of EdD program coursework in Educational Leadership engaged in the poster presentation and chair matching event. Nine of the students were members of the PK-12 concentration of the program, and 11 were members of the higher education concentration. From the population, 12 students were female and 8 were male, while 12 students were White and 8 were Black. Table 1 provides population demographics by concentration, race, and gender. The participants were employed in a diverse range of positions, including as school-based and district administrators in PK-12 and as advisors, assistant/associate deans, and faculty at community colleges and universities.

**Table 1**  
*Demographics of Population by Concentration, Race, and Gender*

Concentration	White Female	White Male	Black Female	Black Male	TOTAL
PK-12	4	2	1	2	9
Higher Education	4	3	3	2	11
TOTAL	8	4	4	4	20

Students were assured that their participation in the study was strictly voluntary, although all students were required to participate in the poster presentation and chair matching event as part of the EdD program progression.

Data collection occurred using an anonymous survey developed using Qualtrics software. The purpose, informed consent, and link to the survey were distributed via email to the students' university email accounts following the poster gallery walk and chair match. Survey questions were a blend of five open-ended questions and three Likert-type questions on a 10 point scale. The Likert-type scale questions inquired about the level of imposter syndrome felt prior to the poster gallery walk, the level of imposter syndrome felt immediately following the poster gallery walk, and the level of support and affirmation by faculty perceived or not perceived by the participant as a result of the poster gallery walk and chair matching process.

The open-ended questions inquired about the effects of the feedback received from faculty during the gallery walk; how students felt about their planned study and their standing in the program following the gallery walk; positives of the poster development assignment, gallery walk, and chair matching process, if any; recommendations for improvement of the poster development assignment, gallery walk, and chair matching process; and any other details the participant wanted to share and had not in the previous survey question responses. See Table 2.

**Table 2**

*DiP Poster Development, Gallery Walk, and Chair Match Survey*

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In reflecting back upon the DiP Poster development, Gallery Walk, and Chair Matching:

1. Describe the effects of the feedback you received from EdD faculty on your planned study, if any.
  2. Describe how you felt about your planned study and your standing in the program following the DiP Poster Gallery Walk.
  3. Using the sliding scale provided, where was your level of “imposter syndrome” prior to the DiP Poster Gallery Walk, with 1 being the lowest level of feeling like an imposter and 10 being the highest level of feeling like an imposter:
  4. Using the sliding scale provided, where was your level of “imposter syndrome” following the DiP Poster Gallery Walk, with 1 being the lowest level of feeling like an imposter and 10 being the highest level of feeling like an imposter:
  5. Using the sliding scale provided, describe the level of support and affirmation you did or did not feel as a result of the DiP Poster Gallery Walk and the chair matching process, with 1 being the lowest level of support & affirmation and 10 being the highest level of support and affirmation:
  6. What were the positives of the DiP Poster development, the Gallery Walk experience, and the chair matching process for you, if any?
  7. What aspect(s) would you recommend be reconsidered or revised from the DiP Poster development, the Gallery Walk, and the chair matching process, if any?
  8. Please share anything else you would like to add that you have not addressed regarding the DiP Poster development, the Gallery Walk experience, and the chair matching process.
- 

Responses were anonymous to induce greater forthcomingness, particularly given the positionality of the researchers as the participants’ instructors in the EdD program. Of the 20 pre-candidacy doctoral students who made up the population, 12 (60%) completed the survey. Average time for completion of the survey was 10 minutes 48 seconds.

Using content analysis, we examined the survey data collected from the 12 pre-candidacy EdD student participants. Open-ended student responses were analyzed using open coding (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Codes were developed and then expanded to create broader categories, which in turn were analyzed to find patterns for theme identification (Mertler, 2019). The Likert-type scale question responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics, with emphasis on measures of central tendency and variability (2019).

Responses to the open-ended questions and the Likert-type scale questions were triangulated to support findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Field notes from in-class observations, student assignment submissions leading up to the development of the DiP poster and gallery walk, and student feedback regarding these assignments were also compiled and analyzed to cross-check with the survey responses to ensure credibility of our interpretations (Merriam, 2009). As the instructors, semester-long engagement with the students allowed for the development of a high level of trust with us in the dual role as the researchers (Mertler, 2019).

## **Results**

Descriptive statistics were calculated and analyzed for the Likert-type scale questions within the survey. See Table 3. For question #3 regarding feelings of imposter syndrome prior to the poster gallery

walk, with 1 being the lowest level of imposter syndrome and 10 being the highest level of imposter syndrome, the mean for the 12 participants was 7, the median was 8, and the mode was 8. The range was 1 to 10. The standard deviation was 2.73.

For question #4 regarding feelings of imposter syndrome following the poster gallery walk, with 1 being the lowest level of imposter syndrome and 10 being the highest level of imposter syndrome, the mean for the 12 participants was 4.42, the media was 5, and the mode was 5. The range was 1 to 9. The standard deviation was 2.19.

For question #5 regarding the perceived level of support and affirmation following both the gallery walk and the chair matching process, with 1 being the lowest level of support and affirmation and 10 being the highest level, the mean was 7.83, the median was 9.5, and the mode was 10. The range was 1 to 10. The standard deviation was 2.95.

**Table 3**

*Descriptive Statistics for Likert-Type Scale Survey Questions #3, #4, #5*

Question	Count	Mean	Median	Mode	Max	Min	S.D.
#3 Imposter Syndrome Prior	12	7	8	8	1	10	2.73
#4 Imposter Syndrome Following	12	4.42	5	5	1	0	2.19
#5 Level of Support & Affirmation	12	7.83	9.5	10	1	10	2.95

For the open-ended survey questions, when asked about the effects of the feedback received from faculty during the gallery walk regarding their DiP posters, students felt the coaching and feedback received was helpful and reassuring. One student indicated that “after the gallery walk, I knew I was on the right track with my study. I gained confidence that I was working with the best sources and received suggestions for further research studies to consider.” Other responses were similar, noting that the gallery walk “gave me a chance to reflect on current ideas, brought various perspectives to the table that I had not considered, stretched my thinking regarding my topic, and gave me practice to verbalize my research process.” Two students found that their study was too broad based upon faculty feedback and accordingly narrowed the focus of their DiP.

Four of the 12 students indicated that they wished there had been more time for the gallery walk to allow for more rich, deeper discussions. The gallery walk was just over an hour in length. These students felt that, in order to provide feedback to all students present, there was not sufficient time for faculty to have more expansive conversations or for students to ask additional questions to faculty members.

When students were asked about how they felt about their planned study and standing in the program following the DiP Poster Gallery Walk, 10 of the 12 students felt positive as a result of their participation. Students described how they felt following the gallery walk:

“better prepared”	“valued”
“respected”	“having a sense of accomplishment”
“energized”	“excited moving forward”
“confident”	“having better clarity and overall focus”
“charged up”	“exhilarated”
“focused”	“invested”

Several students indicated they felt reassured following the gallery walk, with one accurately capturing the concept, saying “I thought I had a good idea [for a DiP topic], but that was confirmed by my discussions with several faculty who I had not previously worked with. Their excitement and encouragement was very

rewarding for me.” Of the negative responses, one reiterated that they wished they had more time with faculty, while another student “still felt nervous and unsure” following the gallery walk.

Students were asked about the specific positives of each of the DiP poster development, the gallery walk, and the chair matching process. With respect to the DiP poster, students were appreciative for having specific instructions and a template provided so that they could “focus on the content” rather than formatting. Additionally, several students indicated that the task of developing the poster required them to organize and focus their thinking around their DiP. “I felt significantly more invested in my own research study as the poster process forced me to make key decisions regarding the direction to take the DiP,” one student shared. Another student added that their poster has been hanging on the wall by their workspace since the gallery walk to help inspire them to stay motivated to complete their DiP study and their EdD coursework.

Regarding the gallery walk, students were pleased that they were able to meet more of the faculty to get to know them and their research interests better. Given that the students had only been enrolled for two semesters in the program, their exposure to the majority of the faculty had been limited to brief introductions through the admissions process or orientation to the program. The DiP poster gallery walk allowed for more meaningful and purposeful interaction that provided insight to the students about what potential chairs had to offer them in pursuit of the DiP study. Students also indicated that the gallery walk provided them with the opportunity to practice communicating their vision for their DiP and showcase their ideas for their studies. Finally, the gallery walk also uplifted students who doubted themselves prior. “The [DiP] process and gallery walk made me feel scholarly and recognized as a contributor to the education community.” One student indicated that the gallery walk was a “validation of my capabilities” and another remarked that “I felt positively affirmed and confident when professors engaged and showed interest in my study.” Several students indicated that they were quite nervous to receive feedback but ultimately felt reassured and more confident in their next steps for their studies after taking in and applying the changes suggested by faculty.

For the chair matching process that followed the gallery walk, students noted their appreciation for not having a chair simply assigned or having to search out a chair for their dissertation study on their own without any guidance or support. “Understanding that I had a voice in the process left me humbled and honored with chair matching,” one participating student shared. Another said, “I am specifically appreciative of the intentionality in matching the chair” and that they appreciated the opportunity to “get a feel for who’s interested and personalities would be a good match.” Ultimately, students by and large seemed pleased with the matching process for their DiP chairperson.

Students recommended several areas for improvement. Most frequently, more time for the gallery walk was mentioned so that there was an opportunity for more interaction and more depth in those interactions. Additionally, one student suggested dedicated time to view and discuss their peers’ DiP posters and provide or receive feedback, indicating that they valued the constructive criticism and ideas of fellow practitioners. Further, including current and former EdD students who had been through the DiP poster gallery walk process was recommended to provide additional practitioner feedback and encouragement. Building upon the idea of supporting student voice and agency, a suggestion included having dedicated time for students to question potential chairs about their communication and feedback style.

When asked in closing if there was anything else they would like to share about the DiP poster development, the subsequent gallery walk, or the chair matching process, several noted the impact on their imposter syndrome. One student shared:

This process was a big step in moving through the imposter syndrome continuum. Please know at times I still ask myself ‘am I really doing this?’ as I still have recurring moments of imposter

syndrome...but the support from faculty and classmates [demonstrated at the gallery walk] have provided me with the inspiration and drive on the tough days to keep pushing forward. Similarly, another student emphasized the value of the entire process by noting, "I believe this process is critical to the overall experience of the program; I left feeling hopeful and excited about moving forward with my DiP and with my chair."

Final critical feedback again related to needing more time for the gallery walk, though couched in positive regard for the experience. "The night was fun and exciting. It was a celebration - and felt it. With more time and opportunity to connect with all faculty members, it would have been perfect!"

## Discussion

The present study was conducted in order to determine whether the addition of a DiP poster gallery walk during the second semester of an EdD program would aid in students' overall success. The gallery walk process also allowed for the students to be directly involved in the selection of their dissertation chairperson. Specifically, the study was designed to evaluate whether the approach used had a reductive effect on perception of imposter syndrome, increased the likelihood of a positive initial relationship between the student and their selected chairperson, and ultimately, led to a more successful dissertation process. This innovative use of a poster presentation forum deviates from the typical idea of a research poster forum, but the findings herein showed that the structure and function of the event achieved the anticipated results.

As indicated throughout the literature and showcased within our own program, students entering and participating in a doctorate program in education experience some level of imposter syndrome. Unfortunately, this can lead to additional anxiety, a decrease in academic performance, and possibly leaving the program altogether. The students in our program are practitioners, as well as adult learners, who may not have participated in a graduate-level academic setting since the pursuit of their master's degree. The individuals selected for admission to the program are required to have a significant level of expertise and experience in the field of educational leadership, typically more than seven years working in the field and perfecting their leadership skills. As a result, these students more than likely completed their previous degrees many years earlier. The students have been adding to their practitioner skills and serving the people of their respective communities, but most positions in the field do not require extensive research and writing skills, like what is required in a doctorate program.

Identifying the PoP for the DiP is an important part of the first two semesters in the EdD program at XYZ. This decision and initial data collection can directly impact student success, specifically related to the DiP. Students at this point in the program have identified the PoP, presented their initial study idea to their supervisors, and gathered relevant literature to support the focus of the study. It is important that students create a solid foundation as the structure of the EdD program curriculum requires them to add to the DiP each semester. The opportunity to present their prospective study to faculty members and the members of their cohort plays an important role in solidifying their topic selection, as well as providing them with a safe space to collect initial feedback that can strengthen their overall study ideas. As previously indicated, the relationship with the chairperson has an impact on the student's success, and this event creates a collegial setting where students can discuss ideas with faculty, share a meal, and begin to build a relationship with their chairperson.

Based on the results from the student survey, we were able to implement recommended changes to the next poster gallery walk. These changes included additional time to discuss the posters and engage with faculty and peers. Students were provided with additional preparatory assistance that we hoped would lead to a more comfortable, engaging experience. If there were any aspects of the experience that students described as leading to additional anxiety and increased feelings of imposter syndrome or

dissatisfaction with the process, we take the recommendations of the students very seriously and sought to address any identified concerns.

### **Conclusion**

As practitioners ourselves, we have been in similar situations and understand the students' hesitancy and concern related to their academic abilities and taking on something as intense as a doctoral program. It was our hope that the DiP poster development, the gallery walk, as well as the opportunity to be directly involved in the selection of dissertation chairs, would help lessen aspects of the imposter syndrome experienced by the students and lead to increased satisfaction with the program. We also sought to find innovative ways to assist students in their efforts to achieve the level of academic success required to successfully complete the doctoral degree program.

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# Design Considerations and Implementation of First Cohort of International Partnership in Educational Administration

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the International Council of Professors of Educational Leadership (ICPEL) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



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*This study investigates the experience of the first-year implementation of an international partnership between a university in the United States and one in the Middle East. Through thematic analysis, document analysis, and participant observation as our methods, we offer a detailed description of design elements and instructional strategies used during the partnership, assessing their relevance, responsiveness, and benefits to the partner institutions and their clientele. The findings support the use of hybrid cohort models in cross-national partnerships for educational leadership and are closely aligned with the literature, however, also add specific experiences and perspectives of those directly involved. In conclusion, the study highlights that for optimal outcomes, international university partnerships require not only early planning but also mutual trust, moving beyond paternalistic, reductive, “North-South Global Perspectives” many traditional partnerships promulgate.*

As the pace and complexity of the global society continues to increase, national governments, organizations, and institutions across the world need to engage in collaborative efforts. From climate change to international terrorism to food and resource insecurities to political instability to the COVID-19 crisis, the challenges nations face are global and interconnected. Global problems require global solutions, collaborative work achieves more than that remaining siloed.

As incubators of new ideas, innovations, and talent, higher education institutions are gateways to foster global partnerships among students, faculty, and other agencies committed to social, cultural, and economic transformation. Universities' roles as catalyst agents and key partners in the global knowledge economy depend on their ability to transcend their traditional local and national boundaries by developing new infrastructures and entrepreneurial cultures responsive to the demands of international partnerships that an increasingly global system of higher education requires. Such efforts have resulted in a plethora of collaborations.

While the types and models of international university linkages among institutions vary, most partnerships center on student exchange, faculty exchange, research partnerships, and the establishment of satellite campuses (Hamdullahpur, 2020; Knight, 2015; Waterval et al., 2015). The vast differences in needs, designs, and implementation make it impossible to have a clearly defined set of standards for working with partnerships (Helms, 2015). However, institutions can glean from existing partnerships and gain valuable lessons by learning from how others were formed and implemented. The existing research on university partnerships is often focused on the impetus, benefits, and challenges faced through formation (Tekleselassie & Ford, 2019), however, what is not often examined and communicated is the experience involved in the boots on the ground implementation. Much remains unknown regarding the actual rollout of these endeavors, particularly from key agents participating in each step.

This study will fill such a void by examining a partnership between a university in the US and one in the Middle East (ME) that resulted in the creation of a Ph.D. program in educational administration. The focus encompasses the intricacies of the first-year implementation, analyzing the strategies employed to address the needs of all invested stakeholders in this program level partnership. This will include an examination of the hybrid cohort model created and adapted to facilitate instruction, foster student engagement, and leverage the support of involved faculty and staff. The examination will also illuminate course selection; instructor assignment; and student evaluations and grading, including adjustments made to meet students' unique learning styles and prior background and knowledge frameworks; thereby making the partnership responsive to context, institutional priorities, and unique cultural demands. This will add to the growing body of knowledge around cross-national partnerships.

### **Research Questions**

The following two research questions guided the study: *(a) What approaches or design decisions grounded the partnership to accommodate the needs of major clientele? (b) What instructional and learning outcomes emerged through the first-year implementation and how do they inform research, policy, and practice for future university partnerships?*

### **Significance of the Study**

The literature on international university partnerships is growing as this area of work expands. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the rise in partnerships was being felt globally and now with the increased experiences of conducting business online, this upward trajectory is likely to increase as the viability of online learning is being embraced by institutions and governments that were previously skeptical about accepting this modality. Hybrid models in particular, are being employed both within and between

countries because they incorporate elements of both synchronous face-to-face and asynchronous online components (Knight, 2015).

The hybrid cohort partnership being studied was initiated with a first cohort of students during the 2017-2018 academic year. The cohort consisted of eight students from the ME institution, six females and two males. Selection was highly competitive, with over 300 applicants for eight slots. During the first year, the students were enrolled in both universities; working toward a Post Master's Certificate (PMC) at the US institution and the first-year credits of their Ph.D. program at the ME institution. This study will contribute to the conversation and growing body of knowledge on international university partnerships, particularly hybrid cohort models. The next sections will review the literature on international university partnerships, hybrid instruction, and cohort models in educational leadership.

### **International University Partnerships**

International university partnerships are increasing in scope and number to meet the needs of an increasingly globalized society. Partnerships are formed at several levels within institutions of higher education, from the individual level where a couple scholars collaborate on research or publications, to the program or school level, as well as at the top levels of universities. Successful university partnerships can have an impact at any of these levels as well as in individual disciplines both nationally and globally (Hamdullahpur, 2020). On the individual level, students and faculty can benefit, and at the institutional level, the human capacity is increased at the partner institutions. Hamdullahpur (2020) stated, "society and the global economy are best served when our universities and their community of students, scholars and staff members branch out to develop international partners that multiply impact and opportunities to shape a more prosperous future, domestically and globally" (p. 29). Just as the partnerships can be formed at different levels, the goals, designs, and approaches vary based on the needs of the partners and the skills and experiences of those involved in the planning and implementation (Leal Filho et al., 2022).

One thing agreed upon by many scholars is the need for equality and mutuality for all partners (Hamdullahpur, 2020; Leal Filho et al., 2022; Mendoza, 2022). One partner should not be considered superior to the other in perceptions, design, contributions or in the benefits experienced. When one partner is perceived as superior this encourages and perpetuates epistemic injustices by keeping one partner as the giver of knowledge and understanding and one as the receiver (Mendoza, 2022). To have equality between partners it is critical to establish and nurture deep relationships between individuals involved in the partnerships (Mendoza, 2022). Leal Filho et al., (2022) stated, "these individuals (champions of the partnerships) must find common goals with their international partners that guide projects and initiatives, have the cultural and linguistic competencies for successful interactions and relationship building, and have the necessary support and incentives from their institutions" (p. 56).

Many international university partnerships fail to reach implementation, making sound planning critical for success. Planning help avoids anticipated challenges and allows room for flexibility and agility, cushioning against unanticipated challenges. Important planning considerations fall roughly into two categories, administrative or operational aspects and cultural and contextual factors (Helms, 2015). It is critical to establish and maintain transparency for legal, financial, and academic concerns; to continually engage leadership and necessary faculty and staff and to institute an evaluation process to maintain quality (Helms, 2015; Tekleselassie & Ford, 2019).

Institutional culture is one area that formally sanctioned policies, rules, and regulations established during the partnership provide limited ground rules for success. Culture determines unwritten rules that govern gender and race relationships, exposes ethical concerns about who benefits or loses, helps analyze issues of access and equity, and the overall impact of the partnership on institutional and

human capacity (Helms, 2015; Tekleselassie & Ford, 2019). As a result, a successful partnership depends on conscious efforts to accept cultural differences and account for opportunities and challenges unique to the makeup of each institution. Cultural knowledge is cultivated when communication remains open at all stages of the partnership (Tekleselassie & Ford, 2019), building a sense of confidence, inclusivity, and transparency.

## **Hybrid Models**

Details of hybrid models vary widely; however, a brief review will be provided highlighting characteristics of effective design choices. Successfully designed hybrid models tend to pull from the benefits of both synchronous face-to-face and online asynchronous modalities, while often decreasing or avoiding the challenges. Key considerations for hybrid programs include the choice of learning hub or learning management system (LMS), techniques for effective communication, strategies for encouraging and supporting time management, ease of access to digital content, and strategic harnessing of both synchronous and asynchronous pedagogies (O'Byrne & Pytash, 2015).

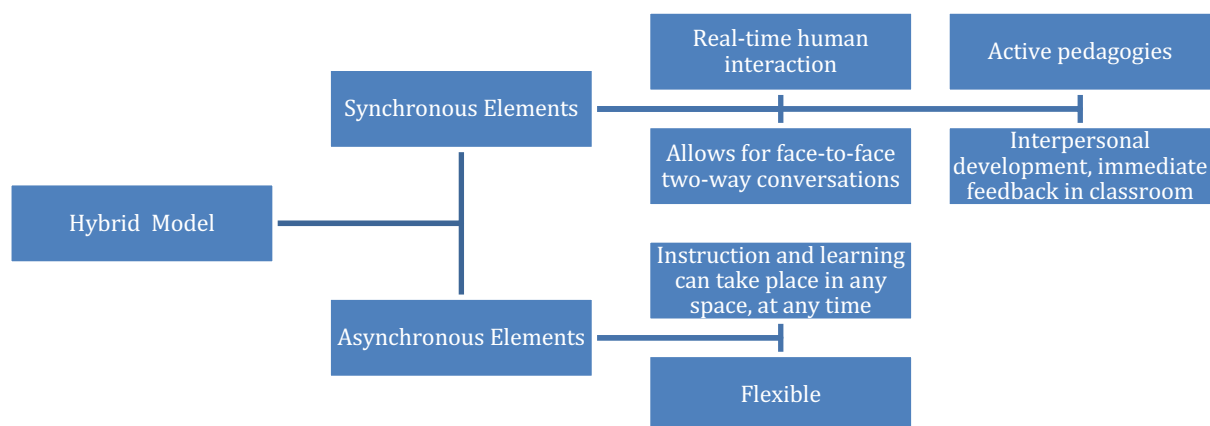
Face-to-face learning, which traditionally took place by meeting in the same physical space allowing for two-way conversations, now includes, synchronized online options such as conference calls, video conference calls, computer-based conference calls, webinars, (Varkonyi, 2012), and online live classroom sessions. The benefits of synchronized modalities include human interaction and verbal exchange of ideas (Varkonyi, 2012), as well as a sense of community that can be built while meeting together.

Asynchronous learning takes place when and where the instructor and students choose. In this modality, students enjoy the flexibility of accessing the learning materials from the comfort of their physical spaces (office, home, etc.), and on their own time, avoiding the need to travel to campus to attend scheduled classes. Asynchronous elements are delivered through discussion boards, group projects, collaborative papers, etc. A major benefit of asynchronous methods is that they are not bound by pace, time, or place (O'Byrne & Pytash, 2015).

Several benefits are experienced when there is a hybrid of both synchronized and asynchronous elements both delivered online. These include reduced financial burden and reduced need for classroom space, equipment, and travel. Hybrid models embrace the benefits of the asynchronous aspects, which include having time to go over materials individually to become more prepared to engage in classwork and discussions (Shea et al., 2015). Having time to think and prepare before interactions can encourage participation in discussions for students who do not feel comfortable when put on the spot in face-to-face courses. This suggests that the asynchronous portion can be more equitable as it allows time for students to work at their own pace and not compete for time in class (Shea et al., 2015). Some students also find it less stressful to work on their own time, when they have more motivation to learn, as opposed to being tied to class schedules. Online hybrid models also allow for students and faculty to gain exposure to scholars from outside of their geographic location, diverse individuals who they may otherwise not have the opportunity to work with (Stephens et al., 2017).

Scholars underscore that while designing hybrid instruction can take a colossal amount of work on the frontend as courses are designed, it provides multiple benefits (Beck, 2010). See Figure 1. Some of the benefits Beck (2010) discussed include (a) the opportunity to have enhanced and highly rigorous instruction, standard curriculum, and access to peer discussion forums; (b) unrestricted access to more enhanced and interactive learning materials such as videos, PowerPoints, and simulated activities; and (c) high student exam performance because of access to the rigorous and standardized curriculum.

**Figure 1**  
*Benefits of Hybrid Models*



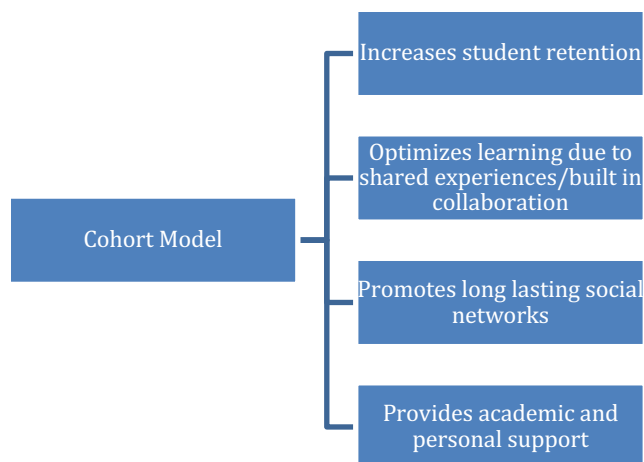
A hybrid modality, however, has its challenges. Technical issues are a common challenge that frustrate both instructors and students. Some of these are difficult to avoid especially when an institution lacks optimal instructional technology or supports (Tekleselassie & Ford, 2019). Other logistic challenges are avoidable through advanced planning; for example, providing clear expectations and a weekly course calendar, as well as detailed information on technologies. Another common challenge is what Shea et al. (2016) call transactional distance, a barrier to creating an active learning environment due the physical distance between the instructor and the students. These authorities advise that using technology in a loose as opposed to tightly structured fashion, the instructors can leverage technology to promote an active learning environment where students feel connected and engaged.

### **Cohort Model Programs in Educational Leadership**

Many educational leadership programs are built on a cohort model, where students take all or most of their courses together throughout their program, promoting “group cohesion” (Bista & Cox, 2014, p. 4). Additional benefits are experienced with this model for students in educational leadership doctoral programs including high student retention; shared optimal experiences and collaborations; creation of social ties; and increased academic and professional support and interaction. Both faculty and students often express appreciation for what is gained using this model (Bista & Cox, 2014; Leland et al., 2020). See Figure 2.

When people learn together, a certain level of power is accessed through shared understanding, experiences, and reflection. Group projects and group discussions are key components of effective cohort models (Leland et al., 2020). Leadership is an applied field, requiring skills of shared learning which helps to make the connections between theory and practice. Therefore, having goals emphasizing collaboration and shared learning as skills enhance takeaways.

**Figure 2**  
*Benefits of Cohort Models*



### **Research Design and Methodology**

This study used thematic analysis, document analysis, and participant observation for data collection (Kawulich, 2005). Thematically, a close review of the literature was performed examining best practices and norms to investigate and further understand the phenomena of first-year implementation, including classroom dynamics, and unique design aspects. The documents examined included archival and policy documents, the service contract, the design team report, and the program/course curriculum framework. Included as part of the data source are the authors' direct accounts and experiences as participant observers. Meeting reports, personal reflections, journals we collected throughout the partnership served as important sources of data offering an insider's look at the research process (deMunck & Sobo, 1988; Kawulich, 2005). It can be argued that informal conversations are just as valid a method of qualitative data collection as more formal methods, such as interviews and focus groups (Swain & Spire, 2020). It can also be argued that the organic conversations that take place and are used in participant observation may produce more meaningful and robust data than just what is collected through more formal means (Swain & Spire, 2020).

Our personal account captured both planned activities, design elements (included in the original framework of the partnership agreement), as well as unplanned and emergent decisions created in response to immediate and unanticipated opportunities and challenges that occurred during the partnership implementation. By capturing our voices and perspectives as participants intimately involved in both planned and unplanned happenings of this partnership, participant observation served as the most effective method (Kawulich, 2005; Swain & Spire, 2020). We as researchers, however, admit that our perspectives are limited and thus can contain bias, (Kawulich, 2005), a limitation that we attempted to overcome as we reported our findings.

## Discussion of Findings

### ***(a) What approaches or design decisions grounded the partnership to accommodate the needs of major clientele?***

#### **Design Team**

During the planning stage, each institution identified and appointed key Design Team (DT) members who oversaw the day-to-day implementation of the partnership. The first DT member and one of the authors of this article, was the *partnership lead and male representative from the US institution*. He was a part of the partnership discussions from the beginning. Originally from an East African country, he received his Ph.D. from a US institution and had worked in US higher education since 2005. He was a subject matter expert (SME) in Educational Leadership and Administration and an expert on the program offered by the US institution. He was intimately involved in all discussions, deliberations, and decisions made through the first year of implementation and he also designed and taught the first of the six courses.

The next DT member was the *female representative from the US institution*. She was also a part of the DT from the earliest discussions. She was an SME in K-12 Administration and a long-time employee of the US Institution. She retired from her university position immediately prior to implementation, however, remained intimately involved and designed and taught a course for the first year. Her K-12 as well as higher education institutional knowledge and leadership experience uniquely qualified her to fill this role.

The next DT member was that of the *permanent male ME representative*. He was not involved in the initial discussions but joined the ME institution and the partnership during the planning stage and played a critical role in helping get the paperwork signed and passed through the two universities. He was originally from a West African country, however had been educated and employed in the US prior to moving to the ME country. Thus, he was a bridge and cultural ambassador between the US faculty, with their Western perspective, and those he worked directly with at the ME institution.

The next member was that of the *permanent female ME representative*. She joined the partnership during the planning stage. She was the only one on the team originally from the ME country but had obtained her Ph.D. from a European country, strengthening the bridge between the Western perspective and that of the ME country. She was the only DT member who wrote and spoke Arabic, the main language of the students, and thus also contributed heavily to translations. As six of the eight students enrolled in the first cohort were females, she served as an important conduit between the instructors and female students, a cultural norm that had to be accommodated throughout implementation.

The final DT member was the *permanent female US faculty coordinator*, also one of the authors of this article. She was brought onto the team about a year before the first cohort started with the specific purpose of being a full-time overseer of operations between the US and the ME institutions and faculty. She was from the US and educated in the US, however, was equipped with a variety of international cultural experiences that assisted in her role. Another skill she brought was in the area of academic writing, which filled both anticipated and unanticipated needs.

The DT supported the partnership through various activities to ensure that the design and the implementation work proceeded as planned. While all team members worked collaboratively, the DT members at the US institution engaged in four different activities to support the partnership. First, they conducted workshops and training for faculty, university leadership, alumni, and K-12 partners at the ME University. Data and feedback received during the workshops helped customize the Ph.D. curriculum to the unique needs and priorities of the ME University. Second, based on additional input received from the



workshops, the DT offered training for course instructors at the US institution to customize their syllabi, instructional strategies, and expectations for the Ph.D. program. Third, they organized and facilitated meetings between instructors of the two institutions, creating space for direct communication and collaboration. Fourth, they facilitated implementation by leveraging resources within the US university (such as IT, library services, English Language support) to assist both instructors and students.

The DT members in the ME institution supported the partnership in various ways, centering their work on four areas. First, they supported by identifying locally available materials and resources that enhanced student experience, including local education policies, translation of local materials from Arabic to English, and connecting students to locally available data sources. Second, they facilitated internship sites in districts, schools, and higher education institutions, and provided the data US instructors needed to support students. Third, they participated in all classroom sessions as facilitators, providing translation support as needed but also interpreting key concepts, and theories, helping students apply them to the local context. Fourth, and a related role, was that they served as liaisons, supporting US instructors to organize instruction within acceptable norms and practices of the ME university. For example, as most classes were organized in seminar format, involving group activities and active pedagogies, the physical configuration mattered in a culture that disapproves males and females sitting next to each other. As a result, the male and female ME DT members facilitated group activities with their corresponding groups; however, after each group completed their activities, the DT members reported everyone's contributions to the entire class, creating additional space for all students as well as the instructor to probe, internalize, and provide additional perspectives on the activity.

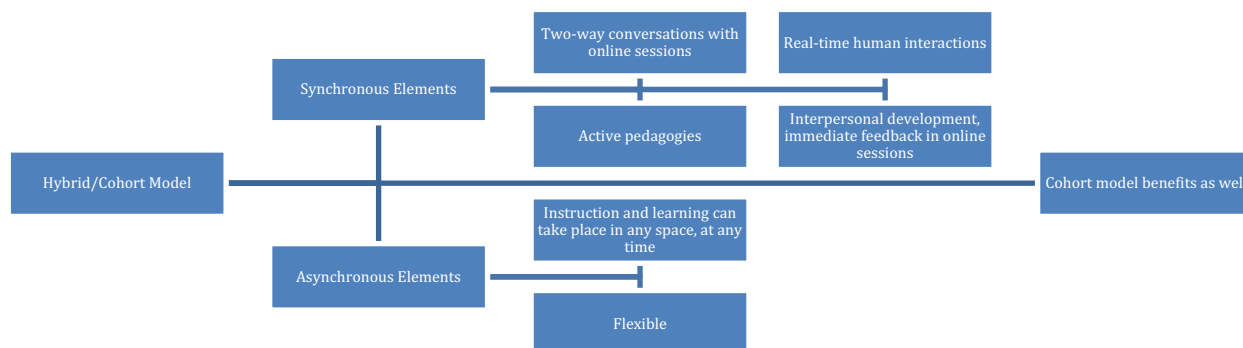
The unique perspectives and strengths of each member of the DT and the positive relationship dynamics between the members were critical at every stage and created an environment of equality and mutuality (Hamdullahpur, 2020; Leal Filho et al., 2022; Mendoza, 2022). On the ME side, each of the permanent faculty representatives primarily dealt with the students of their same sex based on cultural norms, however, they created a cohesive atmosphere and communicated well what each was learning and doing with the students. On the US side, the faculty coordinator also attended all live synchronized sessions of every course and kept the lead male informed at all times on the status of the implementation, as he was not able to be on the project 100% of the time. The faculty coordinator was also able to support the instructors of each course by taking on the responsibility of helping students with the additional writing work necessary for the online elements (Shea et al., 2015), specifically with the language barrier that ended up being more intense than originally anticipated. A successful partnership may not have been as secure had the DT individuals not come to the table with their specific skill sets, perspectives, and backgrounds, and had they not communicated and worked well together (Leal Filho et al., 2022). A great synergy was established creating a "win-win situation" benefiting all parties (Leal Filho et al., 2022, p. 2). The next section will examine the model choices for this partnership.

### **Approaches to the Hybrid Cohort Model**

As the key players engaged in negotiations for years prior to the implementation of the first cohort, one of many areas of discussions included the model that would be used; other discussions surrounded the teaching structure that would be employed including the best order of courses for the program. DT members were aware that the model chosen must be congruent to the values, mission, and cultural tapestry of participating institutions and that of the host country. In addition, as the candidates were to receive educational credentials from both institutions, a Post Master's Certificate from the US university, and Ph.D., from the ME university, much time and effort were invested in creating a model and curricula to meet the standards for both universities.

The model agreed upon was to be hybrid, in that there would be synchronous delivery of instruction via online live sessions, and asynchronous elements to enhance and expand the curriculum. The model was also a cohort, in that there would be one group of students that would move through all of the first six courses together. See Figure 3.

**Figure 3**  
*Benefits of Hybrid/Cohort Model*

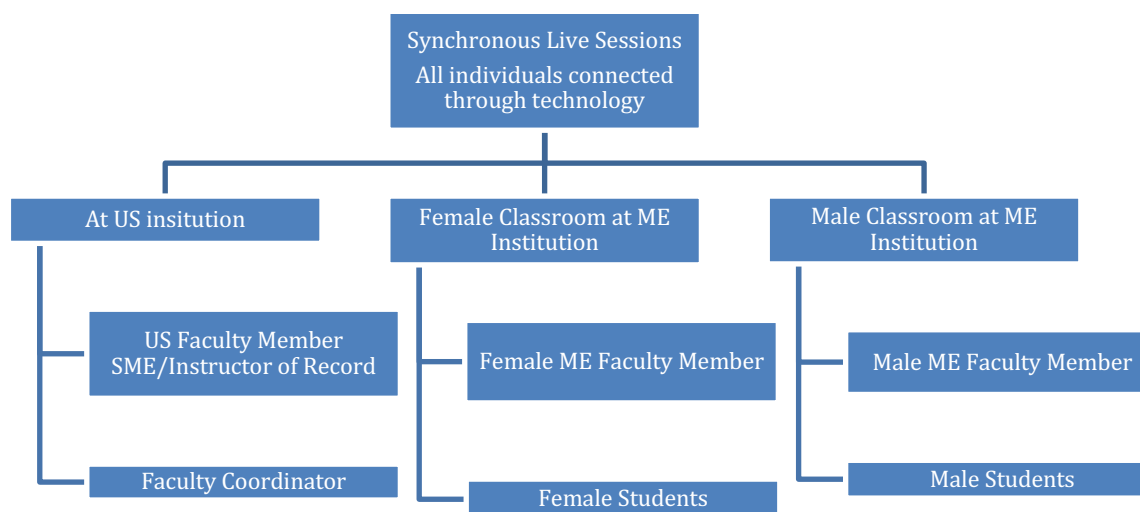


When considering the cohort size, the number had to be high enough to make it financially viable and not too high that the students would not receive high quality instruction. It was determined that eight students with high levels of English skills would be admitted. Over 300 applicants applied, and many were vetted in the process of finalizing those chosen to be admitted.

### Teaching Structure

At the time of designing this program, the ME country did not accredit fully online programs or accept them as rigorous educational experiences. This led to the need for ME faculty and students to attend scheduled classes in on campus classrooms. The teaching structure included having both the male and female ME faculty facilitating the class sessions while the US faculty and instructors of record for the courses attended each live session via video streaming using Blackboard Collaborate. The requirement of both a male and female ME faculty enabled the female students to attend in one classroom while the male students attended in another, accommodating the cultural norms of the ME country. Therefore, for every synchronized live session there were two US faculty and two ME faculty involved. On the US side, there was one SME who was also the instructor of record, and the full-time faculty coordinator. On the ME side, there was both a male and a female faculty member to facilitate the classroom activities. See Figure 4.

**Figure 4**  
*Online Live Session Structure*



The online synchronized sessions allowed the ME students to see their professors in the US and feel more connected to them, allowing them to benefit from strong relationship through the face-to-face component this modality provides. The full-time faculty coordinator working on the US side as well as the two facilitators on the ME side had strong relations that had been established and developed long before the students were admitted (Leal Filho et al., 2022; Mendoza, 2022). These relationships were critical in maintaining the cohesiveness even with the physical distance between faculty and students during live sessions.

The ME faculty were continually available to serve as cultural ambassadors to students and help to diffuse culture shock, especially in the early classes. As was mentioned earlier in the section on the DT, these faculty members were chosen based on their backgrounds that included substantial experience in Western education with both earning their Ph.D.'s in Western countries. The male possessed international working experience and the female had strong local knowledge that was critical to identify and interpret locally relevant instructional resources due to her high level of language proficiency. For example, in the school law course, she assisted in identifying, translating, and interpreting state and national laws, providing the resources and the cultural context the US instructor needed to make the course relevant. These DT members addressed academic as well as personal challenges students faced, removing barriers that could have hindered success. Face-to-face consultations, meetings and advising sessions occurred routinely between the DT members in the ME university and the students; however, between the US instructors and students, they took place during synchronous classes two times a week. As can be seen in the section on the DT, the design was heavy in human capacity.

Since the US institution was to supply the subject matter experts to design the curriculum for each course as well as to teach the first six courses, several regular faculty were involved. To teach the courses and continue with their normal duties at their US institution, the faculty remained in the United States while designing the courses and even while teaching the first year. In order to meet the face-to-face requirement of the ME Ministry of Education, the faculty taught a couple live sessions online each week, while their ME counterparts facilitated in the classroom in the ME country where all of the students attended. See Figure 4. This model tapped into the benefits of both face-to-face and virtual components, even though instruction took place on two continents (O'Byrne & Pytash, 2015). As a result of the design, students were provided with high quality resources, online access to course materials that they could read

on their own pace, while at the same time allowing them to connect face-to-face with the faculty and their peers using classroom activities that allowed for collaboration as a cohort.

In addition to the structure of online sessions, strategic decisions were made in the order of classes. Since the US faculty already carried instructional loads at their home institutions, negotiations included timing that would work for each of them, as well as ensuring the concepts in each course built on and complemented the previous courses. Therefore, the first course taught by the permanent male faculty DT member from the US institution, was on the principalship, and naturally a foundational course for the program. As he was also an integral member of the DT and held a cross-cultural perspective, he was able to facilitate a successful start for the first year. He, the program coordinator, and the ME faculty observed closely during the first course for any areas requiring adjustments in order to create a sustainable partnership course by course.

Utilizing knowledge and experiences as hybrid programs progress is a critical aspect of ongoing improvement and sustainability (Shea et al., 2015). Due to a strong start with the first course and the close relationships within the DT, areas that needed to be smoothed out were done so in a professional and non-threatening manner. The knowledge and experiences gained early on and in subsequent courses, were taken forward allowing for improvements which snowballed, culminating in a much easier experience for the faculty and students with courses that took place near the end of the first year. This knowledge included how to effectively overcome the challenges faced with technology, and the different learning styles and expectations of students as opposed to the teaching styles of the US faculty.

***(b) What instructional and learning outcomes emerged through the first-year implementation and how do they inform research, policy, and practice for future university partnerships?***

The US institution had SME faculty that were involved in designing and redesigning courses that would be used throughout the Ph.D. program. In addition, the US institution provided the faculty members that taught courses for the first year. Instructors who take on hybrid courses need training or experience to fully utilize the benefits of both the online and the face-to-face elements as well must be willing to overcome the challenges this modality presents (Shea et al., 2015). All the US faculty involved in his partnership had already received such training and had the experience and the willingness to implement the hybrid model of instruction as planned.

During the early courses, however, the faculty members expressed discomfort teaching this cohort, because they were unsure about the level of student readiness and English language proficiency. Those concerns, however, began to subside once the professors came to know and work with the students. As the year progressed, there were fewer questions, the students worked hard, and the instructors adjusted to the learning needs and styles of students.

Faculty did experience philosophical differences and divergence about appropriate instructional strategies in graduate programs. Based on the regional culture, the ME faculty and students were accustomed to high power distance culture, and subscribed to instructional strategies that sanction teacher authority, and limit free interaction between teachers and students (Hofstede, 2001). In comparison, the US faculty came from low power distance culture where power is more equalized between instructors and students. The US faculty advocate for student-centered, active and interactive pedagogies. These philosophical differences impacted classroom participation during the initial phase of implementation as students were accustomed to and desired more instructor dominated instruction, resulting in limited interaction. To overcome these challenges, professors learned not to wait for volunteers but rather called students by name. Professors also began supplying discussion questions to the students ahead of the online sessions to give them time to create answers and more confidently participate in class. This was particularly helpful due to the limited mastery of academic English.

Collaboration was a key element in many of the courses, making particular use of the relationship aspect of the cohort design. Due to cultural norms in the ME country, collaboration is not as encouraged or acceptable between the sexes. Female students were able to glean more benefits from collaboration because there were six of them, however, due to the small number of males (two) they had less of an opportunity to learn through collaboration with peers. An optimal cohort experience would have included more males to allow for further collaboration and increased experiences of group dynamics. This was an area that the academic expectations and cultural norms were at conflict and is something that future cohorts would benefit from planning accordingly for more even distribution of female and male students.

The US professors learned from those that taught before them in the schedule, and as they gained more personal experience, they were better equipped to provide higher quality instruction for the students. The learning experiences that took place for both the professors from the US institution and for the faculty members from the ME were critical and priceless.

### **Conclusion**

Moving into the future, international university partnerships will be increasingly necessary due to globalization, and many such partnerships require colossal effort at various levels, from top university administration to the national education related government entities, to faculty, students, and all groups that can be impacted. Obtaining and considering the input from these groups before implementation is critical to appropriately customize the curriculum for indigenous and local practices, especially those including aspects involving sustained internship and practicum experiences. Second, it is critical to incorporate design features that include local expertise as these offer numerous dividends, connection to local resources, avoiding cultural blind spots, and helping overcome challenges not anticipated in the design.

Third, all parties should benefit from partnerships. For example, in this case, the ME university gained a newly developed Ph.D. program, grew in human capacity and cultural awareness, and the US university benefited not only in terms of tuition revenue, but also gained valuable lessons and cross-cultural experiences as it diversified and enriched courses and instructional strategies. This confirms that successful international partnerships are mutual, and benefit all parties engaged and that this understanding requires moving beyond paternalistic, reductive, “North-South Global Perspectives” many traditional partnerships promulgate.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

The implications from this study include the important need for both partner universities to have a voice in the collaborations for the cohort experience to succeed. The partners needed to collaborate on preferred instructional modalities, cohort size and student composition, internship placements and the nature of the internship experience, access to library and local resources in both countries, and much more. In addition, while the degree granting university in the US may need to decide on the academic qualifications of admitted students, the partner institution must have a voice on secondary criteria such as gender composition, years and types of experience, the geographic region of the candidate, school level of the candidate etc., tailoring the admission criteria to human resource and equity-related needs of the country. Such joint admission processes allowed both partner institutions to provide input on considerations most useful to them. Recommendations for future investigations include studies that examine the perspectives of all stakeholders, all design members, and all faculty involved in curriculum design and instruction of courses. Adding these various perspectives would help to overcome the limitations inherent to participant observation that grounded this study.

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# Sociocultural Background Influences on Early Career Rural Educational Leaders: A Phenomenological Study of Appalachian Leadership

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the International Council of Professors of Educational Leadership (ICPEL) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



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*Effective school leaders develop the capacity to connect with their staff, students, and educational stakeholders to form bonds of respect and trust, and to foster a sense of efficacy in their practice and the practice of others. This phenomenological investigation aims to better understand how school principals interpret the influence of their sociocultural backgrounds and how they make meaning of their lived experiences as school leaders in relation to that influence. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, this qualitative study investigates how five rural school leaders consciously perceive and make making of the influence that their sociocultural backgrounds have on their leadership styles and strategies. Findings from this inquiry were organized into four thematic units: the advantages of being local, the context of the community in school-community relations, the leaders' "application of the school" with stakeholders, and the leaders' personal identities. Focusing on their lived experiences, participants provided insights into connections between their local identities as Appalachian leaders and their ability to relate to the diversity of stakeholders in their school communities.*



## Background and Context

Educational scholars have maintained that effective school leaders have the capacity to connect with their staff, students, and educational stakeholders to form bonds of respect, trust, and foster efficacy in their own practice and the practice of others (Bandura, 1997; Bandura, 2009; Mielke, 2021). Having such a capacity to connect in the complexities of today's school systems is arguably more critical than ever. Not only are contemporary educational leaders held to new standards for student expectations and achievement, effective leadership methods, and conventional school responsibilities, but educational leaders are now also part of multicultural, diversifying schools (Fyans & Maehr, 1990; Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006; Gardiner et al., 2009; Barakat et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2021; Lisak & Harush, 2021; Theoharis, 2010).

Fyans and Maehr (1990) explored instances of "how sociocultural background may interact with the perceived culture of the school to influence student motivation and achievement" (p. 5), focusing specifically on public-school elementary, middle, and high school students. Similarly, Gardiner and Enomoto (2006) focused on the role of public-school principals as multicultural leaders. Studies revealed principals did not feel prepared to work with educational students and stakeholders who came from different cultures and backgrounds, but all dealt with issues connected with sociocultural diversity (Faas et al., 2018; Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006; Vervaet et al., 2018). Gardiner et al. (2009) stressed the importance of the leader's sociocultural background, stating, "all individuals, whether they recognize it or not, are multicultural in one way or another, by ascribing to certain beliefs, political persuasions, religions, sexual orientations, or other societal differences" (p. 143).

Within the context of ever-diversifying school systems in the United States, there is a growing need for educational leaders to understand how their sociocultural background influences their ability to connect with each member of today's diverse staff, students, and educational stakeholders (Brown, 2004; Santamaría, 2014). Understanding educational leaders' self-perception of the influence that their sociocultural background has on their strategies to professionally connect with others might offer important insights for the current divisive social and political tendencies found in many of today's schools and communities (Chan et al., 2019; Houston, 2019; Ylimaki et al., 2017).

This phenomenological study seeks to add to and inform literature on principal preparation programs and scholarship on the impact of the sociocultural background of rural school leaders on their practice. Specifically, themes emphasize the state of sociocultural awareness in rural education systems on methods and rationales current public-school principals take to address connecting with their staff, students, and stakeholders of similar and different backgrounds and cultures. We introduce results relevant to understanding how these thematic elements relate to leadership responsibilities of social justice and cultural relevance awareness and investment within the role of principal as educational leader. To do so, we explore the following phenomenological questions:

1. How do educational leaders consciously perceive the influence of their own sociocultural background and experiences on how they connect with their staff, students, and stakeholders?
2. Subsequently, we seek to better understand how do these elements tie into social justice and cultural relevance for these individuals within their role as rural educational leaders in Appalachian Ohio?

## **Related Literature**

### **Sociocultural Background**

Current research confirms that there are several factors involved when exploring possible influences on an individual's sociocultural background. For example, many researchers confirm that home and family structure plays a major role in shaping a person's sociocultural background (Adhikari, et al., 2018; Anistranski & Brown, 2021; Hobbs, 2013; Kitchen, et al., 2012; Osterman, 2000). Additionally, the culture of one's society and upbringing within that society has an impact on sociocultural background development (Hobbs, 2013; Osterman, 2000; Tichnor-Wagner, 2017). Further, external variables, such as regional development or political climate, can be major influences as well (McCann, 1998; Nesbitt & Weiner, 2001; Walls & Billings, 1977).

### **Sense of Belonging**

Sense of belonging has been identified as a key factor for a healthy school climate as well as stakeholder well-being and success in schools (Akur Vural et al., 2020; Encina & Berger, 2021; Longaretti, 2020). It is clear in scholarship that sociocultural factors affect students' senses of belonging in education organizations, especially students from underrepresented backgrounds (Anistranski & Brown, 2021; Walls et al., 2021). This is true within the United States and globally, in education and healthcare fields (Adhikari, et al., 2018; Chan et al., 2019; Kitchen, et al., 2012; Osterman, 2000). Additionally, the need to cultivate a sense of belonging in educational organizations has been connected to academic achievement and retention (Anistranski & Brown, 2021; Hausmann et al., 2007; Osterman, 2000; Pendergast, et al., 2018).

The importance of belonging can also be applied to school leaders. Thus, the social and cultural contexts of the school's community have distinct implication for the types of students who will feel they innately belong within that community and for those who require additional supports to feel a similar sense of belonging (Kennedy & Jain-Link, 2021; Osterman, 2000; Tichnor-Wagner, 2017).

### **Rural Schools and Communities**

Tichnor-Wagner (2017) commented on how today's young people are "both globally connected *and* locally rooted" (p. 70) because of the inter-connectedness of global economies and industries, such as businesses, Internet services, and educational organizations. This included students in urban and rural communities, alike (Tichnor-Wagner, 2017). Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) found that parents, especially father-figures, play a large role in influencing rural Appalachian students' goals out of high school. Additionally, in their study, Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) noted that, regarding college aspirations, rural Appalachian students share many similarities with students in other rural areas with high poverty rates. Additionally, Hobbs (2013) has found that, "Teaching is a dynamic activity where broad-scale and local changes mean that teachers are continually learning new things and need to adapt" (p. 288). This type of adapting also requires them to understand the social context of the school and local community (Hobbs, 2013).

### **The Politics of the Local in Appalachia**

Politics in the Appalachian region often return to the land and local or regional geography (Holtcamp & Weaver, 2019; Nesbitt & Weiner, 2001; Steele & Jeffers, 2020). Nesbitt and Weiner (2001) also discussed the merits and pitfalls surrounding political ecology in Central Appalachia. The concept of

“political ecology” connects to what Walls and Billings (1977) called “political psychology” (p. 134). Walls and Billings specified,

Actions taken by regional and national planners are defended as technical decisions, rather than political choices among alternative courses of development. Political sociology calls attention to the possibility that the most important decisions may be the “non-decision”: the questions that are never raised and the subjects that never make the public agenda. Examples include public ownership of the region’s natural resources and worker or community owned and controlled industry. (p. 134)

With these political processes in mind, McCann (1998) pointed out that the concept of “mapping” Appalachia is, in itself, subject to social implications and context. McCann (1998) encouraged academics, policymakers, and other interested parties to seek a “...critical understanding of maps and mapmaking... through dialogue between grassroots activists and cartographers in the context of ongoing political projects rather than through continued “contracting out” of mapping projects to external “experts”” (p. 87). The social, cultural, historical, and political contexts of the Appalachian region have influenced policy and politics in the region.

### **The Role of Leadership Identity in Schools**

Hobbs (2013) describes factors influencing rural teacher identities in school-community contexts as boundary-crossing events. When considering the potential for differences in teacher identity-construction and that of educational leaders, DeRue and Ashford (2010) describe leadership as being a “socially constructed and reciprocal relationship” with those whom they lead (p. 628). Further, DeRue and Ashford (2010) theorized . . .

. . . leader and follower identities are not only cognitions that reside within an individual’s self-concept (Day & Harrison, 2007; Day & Lance, 2004; DeRue et al., 2009); they are also socially constructed and inherently related (e.g., granting one person a leader identity frequently instantiates a follower identity for others). (pp. 627-628)

Educational leaders construct their identity through externally and internally influenced processes. DeRue and Ashford (2010) designate three salient components of this process as, “individual internalization, relational recognition, and collective endorsement” (p. 629). These components evolve in complexity as the leader and followers, as respective groups, increasingly accept and hone these titles through “verbal/nonverbal and direct/indirect” actions (p. 632). As educational leaders shape their identity, they are also influenced by their students’ backgrounds and local community-school context (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986; Marishane, 2020).

### **Phenomenological Framework**

This investigation employs a phenomenological framework. Phenomenology is both a philosophy and a method of inquiry (DeHart & Dunn, 2020; Qutoshi, 2018; van Manen, 2016). According to Smith et al. (2012), “Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to the study of experience” (p. 11). As van Manen (2016) stated, “Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences” (p. 9). With philosophical roots in Husserl (Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2021), phenomenology is typically described as an application of hermeneutics that is concerned with four components: lived experiences, how phenomena are consciously perceived, the “essence” of phenomena, and the description of experiential meanings (van Manen, 2016). For scholars such as van Manen, it is primarily a human approach to understanding—the *human scientific study of phenomena* that ultimately attempts to get at *what it means to be human*. In other words, phenomenology is “committed to thinking

about how we might come to understand what our experiences of the world are like” (Smith, 2012, p. 11). As such, we are primarily concerned with the lived experiences of rural Appalachian leaders of K12 public schools and how those educational practitioners perceive and understand the way their sociocultural backgrounds influence their practice.

Lived experiences are complex notions (Smith et al., 2009). Most individuals live out their everyday experiences as taken-for-granted events. Intentionality defines “the relationship between the process occurring in consciousness, and the object of attention for that process” (p. 13). The intentional quality of an incident or happening is defined by one’s personal involvement and perceived understanding of the experience (p. 19). According to Moustakas (1994), “intentionality directs consciousness *toward* something” (p. 68). In van Manen’s words (2015), intentionality refers to “the inseparable connectedness to the human being to the world” (p. 181) and it is “only retrospectively available to consciousness” (p. 182). In this study, we use the phenomenological interview of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to invite participants to turn their retrospective gaze with intentionality on the relationship of their sociocultural background and their lived experiences as school leaders.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

IPA is a form of qualitative research. Smith et al. (2012) explained, “When people are engaged with ‘an experience’ of something major in their lives, they begin to reflect on the significance of what is happening and IPA research aims to engage with these reflections” (p. 3). From there, the researchers make sense of the participants’ meaning-making strategies and concepts. Given the “double hermeneutic” nature of the IPA method (Smith et al., 2012), the data collection and analysis procedures enabled the researchers to explore increased depth in understanding the data.

### **Participants**

As the context of this study is the Appalachian region, we used a criteria-based purposeful sampling of early-career, K12 educational leaders selected from Appalachian Ohio public school districts. Purposeful sampling ensures participant responses are “‘information rich’ and illuminative, that is, [they] offer useful manifestations of the phenomenon of interest” (Patton, 2015, p. 46). For an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a sample size of 3-6 participants is considered an adequate representation of the target population of the study.

According to Smith et. al. (2009), “IPA is an idiographic approach concerned with understanding particular phenomena in particular contexts” (p. 49). As a result, studies using IPA should use “small sample sizes” that make it “possible to gradually build a picture for larger populations” (p. 49). Criteria for the study were the following: (a) licensed K12 public school principals, (b) practitioner in one of the 131 districts of Appalachian Ohio, (c) identify/recognize the district and school as “Appalachian,” and (d) have sufficient experience as a school leader to relate meaningful lived experiences (2-3 years minimum).

As Smith et al. (2009) have instructed, IPA is an approach that is ‘participant-oriented’; that is, by engaging in IPA, the researchers focus on the “human lived experience, and posits that experience can be understood via an examination of the meanings which people impress upon it” (p. 34). Therefore, participants were selected through a purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015) of licensed school superintendents practicing in public school districts primarily within the Appalachian counties with similarly populated rural counties, as designated by databases such as the United States Division of Agriculture and the World Population Review (World Population Review, 2020; USDA, 2020).

Typically, IPA selects three to six participants, which are then in turn studied in depth as significant case studies (Smith et al., 2009). The IPA process may involve multiple interviews for extended periods of time with a small sample of participants. A limiting factor was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. With school closings in the spring of 2021 and increased political concerns faced by many district leaders in the fall of 2021, many school leaders found their attention being directed to those immediate concerns.

For this the study, five principals from four school districts across 6 southern Appalachian Ohio counties were recruited and interviewed. All participants were licensed, practicing building-level educational leaders in their respective districts. Participants were recruited by determining the inclusionary criteria systematically. First, a list of principals of Appalachian schools and their principals was determined using data from both the Appalachian Regional Commission and the Coalition of Rural and Appalachian Schools (a grassroots organization of superintendents and principals in rural eastern and southeastern Ohio). Contact information was provided via a list available at the Ohio Department of Education. Once location was determined an email invitation was sent to potential participants

Of the five educational leaders who participated in this study, most were male and only one was female. Their years of experience as educational leaders ranged from one to seven. While participants' race and ethnicity were not inquired, all could be considered "white" and are representative of the demographics of the region where the study was conducted. There was a range of primary and secondary administrators as well, but secondary-level administrator-participants were of the majority. All participants have been given a pseudonym generated at random via an online baby-name generator website. Much of this demographic information is viewable in Table 1, below.

**Table 1**  
*An Overview of Participant Demographic Information*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Years as a Principal</b>	<b>School Level</b>
Marcus	Male	2	High School
Werner	Male	7	Middle School
Sarah	Female	5	Elementary School
Samwell	Male	1	High School
Hardy	Male	2	High School

## **Data Collection**

Utilizing semi-structured interview protocol as the primary data collection method (Alase, 2017; Patton, 2015; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2015), we developed questions in the research schedule to "facilitate a comfortable interaction with the participant which will, in turn, enable them to provide a detailed account of the experience under investigation" (Smith et al., 2012, p. 59). Interview questions were intended to elicit descriptive, narrative, and structural responses, and the interviewer employed prompts and probes to extend and clarify as needed. The semi-structured interview procedure allowed participants (i.e., principals) to share their narratives of lived experiences and collect data on how they make meaning of and understand the impact of opioids on their schools and students (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Patton, 2015).

Initial interviews were conducted from January 2021 until March 2021. Interview sessions were scheduled for and lasted, on average, 60 minutes. By seeking depth and detail, probes and written follow-up questions were used to invite school leaders to share intimate responses and the conversation going while clarifying ambiguities (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Initial interviews were conducted remotely, using video-conferencing platforms due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All interviews were audio-recorded and

transcribed using an online automated transcription service. After ensuring the accuracy of the transcriptions, we used the data analyzed in the initial interviews to form the follow-up questions that formed our emailed questionnaire. Participants agreed also to respond to an emailed questionnaire and one follow-up interview for clarification. Participants responded to the emailed question prompts via written responses. Notes and memoing were used for the third round of data collection in the follow-up interviews.

## **Data Analysis**

All semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded (Saldaña, 2021). Transcriptions were created using an automated transcription software, then reviewed and “cleaned” by the research team. The transcriptions were then read and re-read, and coded, using labels through an iterative process of initial noting conducted by both researchers (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018; Smith et al., 2012). The qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA was used to assist with the data organization and management during the analysis process. In this process, the first cycle of coding was made using descriptive codes. Initial coding identified labels that were open and descriptive; second cycle coding was done as, what Smith et al. (2009) refer to as “explanatory” or “interpretative” coding. In this process, we began to interpret the lived experiences and perceptions of the participants, beginning to “get at” the meaning and essence of the data they provided.

We employed explanatory or interpretative coding during the second cycle coding process. These codes were then organized into themes (Patton, 2015; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018; Smith et al., 2012). In this phase we identified themes by examining and re-examining the coded data for useful patterns (as a post-coding analysis) in participant narratives that provide evidence of common themes and issues via coding (Patton, 2015; Saldaña, 2021; Smith et al., 2009). Next, the emergent themes from this analysis resulted in units of analyses related to local, national, versus global identities and balancing teacher support with socially and culturally conscious student connection to academic assignments. We utilized emergent data and categorical themes as the primary vehicle for interpretation and analysis. The analytic activities of IPA are further described and detailed as the hermeneutic process.

## ***Hermeneutics as a Process of Analysis***

According to Smith et al. (2012), IPA is “strongly influenced by the hermeneutic version of phenomenology” (p. 34). Hermeneutics—the art of interpretation—has a long historical association with translating, or interpreting, textual language. The roots of contemporary hermeneutics can found in the philosophical works of Wilhelm Dilthey, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Martin Heidegger (Crotty, 2020). Although contemporary hermeneutics can be attributed to Gadamer, Ricoeur is often credited for developing hermeneutics as a phenomenological process (Malpas & Gander, 2015; Porter & Robinson, 2011).

Moustakas’ (1994) work, *Phenomenological Research Methods*, places hermeneutics as a central and essential component of phenomenological analysis. Drawing from Dilthey, Moustakas stated, “hermeneutic science involves the art of reading a text so that the intention and meaning behind appearances are fully understood” (p. 9). For the researcher using the phenomenological interview, the text is the interview and the analysis of the interview. Through in-depth interviewing, we were able to generate texts of participants’ experiences through an interrelationship between the one sharing their experience (the interviewee) and the listener (the interviewer). The process of reflective interpretation involves both a description of a lived experience and the perceptive and intuitive interpretation of the experience’s underlying content and contexts (DeHart & Dunn, 2021; Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2012).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) relies on several interpretative strategies to engage in hermeneutics (DeHart & Dunn, 2021). First, researchers employ line-by-line analysis, coding participants' experiential claims, concerns, and understanding and identify themes or patterns that emerge from the experiential material (Smith et al., 2012). The interpretative process requires that the researchers develop a "dialogue" between the coded data and their psychological (personal, professional, and practical) knowledge to understand and make meaning of the participants' responses. This was accomplished by a collaborative analysis in which both researchers read and re-read the transcriptions and making initial notes of content, language, and interesting comments and concepts. These notes included descriptions of the content, linguistic comments on how participants used language, and conceptual annotations of "each interesting feature of a participant's account" (p. 88).

The next stage of analysis in IPA is the development of emergent themes. According to Smith et al. (2012), "Analyzing exploratory comments to identify emergent themes involves a focus, as the local level, on discrete chunks of transcript" (p. 91). Thematic identification is a manifestation of the hermeneutic circle—an understanding of the whole through its parts (Malpas & Gander, 2015). As Smith et al. (2012) have stated, "The original whole of the interview becomes a set of parts . . . , but these then come together in another new whole . . . in the write up" (p. 91).

The final steps of the hermeneutic analysis in IPA include making connections across emergent themes and then finding patterns across cases (Smith et al., 2012). Specific statements and responses that were identified and recorded were arranged into thematic units or individual textual descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). These thematic units were then integrated based on all participant descriptions and were used to develop a composite textual description (Moustakas, 1994). We categorized these descriptions under four thematic headings:

- The Advantages of Being 'Local'
- The Context of the Community in the Community-School Relationship
- The Leaders' Applications of the School with Community Stakeholders
- The Leaders' Personal Identities, Roles, and Observations.

For the early-career principals in Appalachian Ohio who participated in this study, connection to the local area, as a local or as someone who is clearly invested in the area—if not both, was key to successful leadership.

## **Trustworthiness**

We used methods of validation and trustworthiness for triangulation and to improve the quality of results, such as: peer-debriefing, inter-rater reliability, and follow-up communication as needed for clarification (Patton, 2015). Further, we have previously stated our positionality in connection and relation to the region. The First Author is from the Appalachian region and has worked and lived in this region for most of her life. The Second Author has worked and lived in this region for a number of years. In addition to our closeness to the region, we bridled our experiences through the upkeep of our researcher's journals and through peer-debriefing processes regarding our positionality and separation of our own perceptions and experiences from those of our participants (Ahmankwaa, 2016; Dahlberg, 2006; Hopkins et. al, 2017; Shufutinsky, 2020).

## **Findings**

The fundamental purpose of this study was "to get at" how K12 rural principals in Appalachian schools make meaning of their lived experiences regarding the influence of their sociocultural backgrounds on their leadership styles and strategies. The participants in this study identified as

Appalachian or recognized their schools as being Appalachian and had sufficient experiences in the early years of their principalships to speak to the phenomenon under exploration. Each were licensed K12 practitioners, and all had between 1 and 10 years of service as principal. From the data provided by these individuals four main categorical themes emerged: (1) the advantages of being “local”; (2) the context of the community in the community-school relationship; (3) the leaders’ application of the school with community stakeholders; (4) the leaders’ personal identities, including the way they viewed their roles and general leadership observations. As these findings are discussed through excerpts from the data in the following section, bear in mind the story-telling nature of the Appalachian region.

### **The Advantages of Being “Local”**

The dichotomy between the concepts of “insider” or an “outsider” is common throughout fiction and nonfiction texts concern the U.S. Appalachian region (Billings & Kingsolver, 2018; Schumann & Fowler, 2002). The idea of educational leaders being aware of their status as “local” or “not local” indicated a certain amount of awareness of the context of their position beyond the school-community. Even so, Werner took this idea a step farther when they specifically differentiated between “[Name] County local” and regional local:

I think there's two kinds of local. There's [Name] County local—I mean, there is this, 'Our people from [Name] County, and then there's the regional, Southeast Ohio/ Appalachian [local]. The benefit I'm speaking out is absolutely [name of] County. It is, “You are one of us. Therefore, we trust you first and we're not as skeptical.”

This sense of being accepted, as being local, not only gave Werner credibility but also helped to connect his identity and work as a school principal directly to the community. Werner viewed this connection as an essential aspect of being able to effect change and lead in school improvement. In their words,

Typically, because I’m local, because people have some sort of knowledge—even if it’s incorrect—it gives you an advantage. It gives you the ability for them to listen first and then ask why they’re listening later. That can be very helpful. Instead of fighting for your reputation, your reputation precedes you. It allows for many menial decisions to be just that. You don’t get a lot of pushback on silly stuff because they kind of trust you to take care of the silly stuff. Maybe it’s unwarranted, but I do have to be aware that I kind of get the benefit of bias in most occasions. (Werner, Principal Interview, February 9, 2021)

The advantages of being “local” include not having to “fight for your reputation” and being able to make mistakes without harming school-community relationships (Werner, Principal Interview, February 9, 2021).

Being “local” is defined as being born and raised in the community (Samwell, Principal Interview, March 18, 2021). There is a distinguishment between “county local” and “regionally local,” although both identities generally enjoy smooth transitions into the local rural community as an educational leader. However, the “local” privilege does not negate the growth and development of the participants from their own personal experiences within the community to their professional role as educational leaders.

### **The Context of the Community in the Community-School Relationship**

The context of the community in the community-school relationship, as the label implies, puts the community needs first. However, the first step is establishing ties within the community. For instance, Sarah described their leadership style as being directly connected to the school and community members, saying,

Well, my motto is “People before process.” I like to connect with my staff and my students. [I] try



to make a welcoming, positive climate for all people that enter our building. When people feel cared about, they usually work a little bit harder, and kids seem to react a little bit more positively when we have any issues. So always try to be proactive in the disciplinary ways, with students and staff just by building rapport. [It's the] same with parents and making sure that your communication is happening, whether it be positive or negative, but really try to hit on the positives—especially before something goes wrong. (Sarah, Principal Interview, March 12, 2021)

Meanwhile, some participants believed they fit in with the community and that that helps facilitate their leadership decisions. For instance, Samwell explained the close-knit nature of the local area in which his school is situated:

[Town Name] is so tight knit. There's about 4,500 people. Very rich in tradition. The high school, it sits right in the middle of this town and it's the heart of the community. It runs the community. It's just, there's so much rich tradition here. If you walked through our—if you saw [Name] High School you would... it's a museum. It's not a school. Like, our building was built in 1915. Literally, it has statues and marble steps and murals and paintings and, it's crazy. ... So, yeah. Being born and raised here, and just knowing... like, I just know, community leaders, business leaders, I have good relationships and good ties with people and that's been very beneficial for me to be in that position. (Samwell, Principal Interview, March 18, 2021).

Further, Hardy reflected that “community pride” was a “core value” in his community-school context (Hardy, Principal Interview, March 15, 2021).

The educational leaders in this study were sensitive to community needs, concerns, and perspectives and scaffolds decision-making strategies concerning the school based on the community's baseline. Simultaneously, participants often describe the community as “homogenous”, “culturally rich”, and “diverse”. The seeming paradox lends itself to the glocal perspective unique to the educational leader participants.

### **The Leaders' Applications of the School with Community Stakeholders**

In connection with community context, Hardy ties the core values of the community in with the expectations of the local Board of Education. They explained it this way:

Community is everything. Community pride is the cultural value, “I'm proud to be from [Town Name].” I live in [Town], Ohio but [am] proud to be a graduate of [Local College/University]. Some of these students are fourth, fifth generation graduates of this school, so that's part of it. Hard work. I am fortunate to still in a school district where if there is discipline of a student 96 times out of 100, the parent is going to align themselves with me and not the other way around, as you do find in many school cultures now. (Hardy, Principal Interview, March 15, 2021)

In this excerpt, Hardy emphasizes the importance of his core values as they are aligned with the community's core values and resulting cooperation with students' parents and guardians. His pride of the area is a conscious perception of how his own sociocultural background and experiences influence how he connects with community members and students. This understanding of the local and his personal value systems ties into social justice and cultural relevance as it manifests in Hardy's role as educational leader, as can be seen in the continuation of this excerpt:

So, I think there's a traditional value system here in... the village, but it's surprise—it's not conservative, politically, in the sense that you would think. It's probably quite the opposite. It's very diverse, politically. When I asked the Board of Education, when they hired me, I said, “A year from now, after my the first year, my contract is over, what will I be doing if I'm successful—in your view?” They said, “We want our parents to feel good about the school and feel good about the direction that it's headed. We want our students to be challenged every single day and held

accountable. We want our staff to be working hard. We want to make sure our staff are really actively involved in doing the things they're supposed to do." I said, "Okay." So I wrote all those things down and I always keep them in mind as I plan what I'm doing. I remember what the expectations of the Board of Education were and are. (Hardy, Principal Interview, March 15, 2021)

The leaders' application of the school with community stakeholders, or school-first approach, exposed participants' understanding of their teaching staff, who are often not "local"; support staff, who are often wholly "local"; and the students, who are certainly "local", and creating a safe academic environment for everyone involved.

One participant describes their hope for their school-community is, "to create more understanding when you feel like you don't know the person across from you, or if you feel like they've had completely different life experiences than you" (Marcus, Principal Interview, February 4, 2021). The concept of finding common ground between groups was consistent among participant interviews. Within the local dynamic, educational leaders find themselves acting as "shields" for students seen as outsiders in the community (i.e., openly trans, gender fluid, etc.) and establishing firm boundaries with parents/guardians that often result in loyalty, if effectively done.

### **The Leaders' Personal Identities, Roles, and Observations**

Age and experience were something that Marcus and Werner, respectively, mentioned regarding their own identity development. For instance, Werner explained it this way:

. . . the way I felt when I first started teaching is—when you start as a 20-something and you do whatever you're asked in terms of being in this group or coaching this sport or whatever it might be. There's always this fear that they [the teachers] look at you as the 17-year-old kid. They look at you because you were in their Boy Scout Troop or because you played high school basketball—whatever it might be. So you kind of get that... Even though you're an acquaintance of many people, they can attach [a memory/identity] to you. After I was gone for a little while, it allowed me to come back as an adult. Then I felt like, I could be viewed as a 30-something that I actually was instead of the way I was remembered—or the way they first met me. (Werner, Principal Interview, February 9, 2021)

Werner's lived experience of growing into his identity as a local school principal revealed much about how he viewed his obligations and roles within his community. Time and maturity brought with it respect and responsibility. In their words, one can see an expression of a passion for the local value system and a sense of integrity they hold in being a part of their community.

Such experiences and growth as individuals were, for the leaders, essential to their self-efficacy as decision makers and change agents. Along the same line of thinking as Werner, Marcus reflected,

Your experiences become a really big decider about what happens. It's not just those experiences, but really how you react to those experiences. You have that internal locus of control to where you can when you have a hard decision to make. It's better to make the hard decision than the easy decision a lot a lot of times. That is really kind of the so for a while I was, that's kind of what it was really, really focused on making only the hard decisions. (Marcus, Principal Interview, February 4, 2021)

The participants' personal identities, roles, and observations are complex. Often, these principals discussed strong family ties and loyalty to their family first, which aligns with values reflected in the local community. Regarding any differing opinions or personalities within the family, Werner noted, "Nobody dug too deep and nobody really hated somebody else because they didn't agree with them. I've kind of maintained that, whereas my wife shifted to that." This example of cultural awareness leads to informed methods of "picking your battles" as an early-career principal in Appalachia.

Whether or not participants had upbringings which aligned with the majority of the students, participants were adamantly goal- and relationship-focused. Werner went so far as to say, “I am not the center of the building.” Trust, connection, and reflection on the underlying issues amid the daily tasks create the opportunity for participants to recognize some ways their past experiences emerge within their leadership approaches.

## **Discussion**

This study informs scholarship on principal preparation and practice. In particular, it addresses the issues of preparing aspiring leaders for the cultural diversity and complexities of the various districts that they will serve in. The findings of this study inform current practitioners who are experiencing new trends in issues of leadership due to diversifying demographics in school districts and communities that have historically been more culturally homogeneous. Furthermore, our findings serve to explore needed efforts to thwart the current divisive tendencies found in many of today’s school-communities.

The goal of this study was explore meaning making as a theoretical framework and the phenomenological language of lived experiences of early career principals in Appalachian Ohio. Moreover, we aim to better appreciate the importance of culturally responsive leadership for educational leaders’ understanding of how their sociocultural backgrounds and experiences influence their leadership style and methods. As such, this study gets at the importance of a socio-culturally aware leadership for cultivating equitable education systems for the 21<sup>st</sup> century (2022 AERA Meeting Call for Submissions, 2021). However, this study is not without its limitations.

### **Limitations**

Because this study was conducted during a global pandemic, one limitation of this study is the unknown impact of the unique pressures put on all educational leaders at this time. Even so, participants were able to draw on a mix of previous and current experience to participate in this study. Additionally, while we had five participants, only four were available for follow-up interview response. Even so, we assumed that participants answered all questions reflectively and honestly.

### **Delimitations**

We selected IPA as our research method because we aimed to specifically focus on current, early-career educational leaders (i.e., principals) in Appalachian Ohio. For instance, we aimed to interview principals with 10 or fewer years of leadership experience. IPA designates that a small sample size is important for an in-depth analysis and understanding of the meaning-making processes behind leadership decisions (Smith et al., 2012), so having five participants worked within the parameters of this study. However, incorporating other methods and target groups may be relevant for future research regarding how educational leaders consciously perceive the influence of their own sociocultural background and experiences on how they connect with their school-community stakeholders.

### **Implications**

Locally based awareness and knowledge has historically been important to individuals and communities for survival and social capital development (Beyer, 2018; Houser, 2017; Nesbitt & Weiner, 2001). Additionally, concepts of asset-based leadership (Ebersöhn, & Eloff, 2006; Forrester et al., 2020; Nel, 2018) emerge in the data. These observations imply that a more direct study about asset-based

leadership, local capital, or resource-oriented methods of educational leadership could further contribute to the currently understanding of several topics. For example, some topics may include: teaching, learning, and leading based on depth of understanding of how educational leaders' sociocultural background influences their leadership effectiveness.

Regarding principals' perspectives in Appalachian Ohio, four salient themes emerged from the data: (1) the advantages of being "local", (2) the context of the community in the community-school relationship, (3) the leaders' application of the school with community stakeholders, and (4) the leaders' personal identities, including the way they viewed their roles and general leadership observations. These themes leave implications for consideration concerning future research, school-level leadership practice, and principal preparation programs.

### ***Implications for Future Research***

There are many opportunities for future research that are evident from the findings of this study. Consideration should be given using varying methodologies to explore the influence of socio-cultural backgrounds of leaders on their practice. Alternatively, other researchers may use other methods or target groups to understand the influence sociocultural background on educational leaders' decision-making and perspective concerning social justice and cultural relevance in the school-community context. In addition to embracing other research methods, it would be valuable to understand the perspectives of other educational leaders, such as educational leaders in higher education organizations, superintendents, policy makers, and late-career principals. This research encourages educational leaders across these career pathways to consider their positionality and alternative routes to connecting with their stakeholders and constituents in more meaningful ways.

### ***Implications for Practice***

Principals and other educational leaders can benefit not only from reflecting on their "local-ness" and how that influences the messages they send to faculty, staff, students, community members, and stakeholders in the area. Based on the data, educational leaders' self-perception and awareness of their local-ness influences their effectiveness within the school context, at least at the building-level. Naturally, this tied into how the principals interacted with community members and perceived the community-school partnership—or, at least, relationship. We recommend that practicing educational leaders consider their own sociocultural background and the subliminal influences it may have on the meaning-making processes of interacting with Appalachian communities and educational stakeholders.

### ***Implications for Preparation Programs***

There is currently limited evidence that principal preparation programs explore this topic (Santamaría, 2014; Zembylas, 2010). Based on the emergent data, principals' local identities link to their calling to stay in the local area and Appalachia. Higher education institutions with educational leadership programs may consider questions such as: Do or how should principal preparation programs address these issues? How does self-understanding of sociocultural background aid preparation candidates who struggle with recognizing the sociocultural aspects of a given local area and region? How does sociocultural awareness provide additional opportunity for candidates aspiring to become school leaders? How can sociocultural education for leaders be integrated with reflective practitionership for aspiring school leaders? How does a school leader's self-awareness and knowledge of sociocultural background benefit grow-your-own programs (e.g., local programming, problem-solving based on local resources) in

their local schools and districts? As community representatives and advocates it is imperative that aspiring educational leaders know themselves and be well acquainted with who they are as individuals to empower them to connect effectively with every individual in their school in necessary and various ways.

### **Conclusion**

This study explored what makes educational leaders effective in the diversifying, contemporary context of rural schools in the United States through educational leaders' perspectives. We found that four main themes emerged from the participants' lived experiences in answering the questions: (1) How do educational leaders consciously perceive the influence of their own sociocultural background and experiences on how they connect with their staff, students, and stakeholders? and (2) How do the elements in Research Question One tie into social justice and cultural relevance for these individuals within their role as rural educational leaders in Appalachian Ohio? These themes included: the advantages of being "local"; the context of the community in the community-school relationship; the leaders' application of the school with community stakeholders; and the leaders' personal identities, roles, and observations. Rural educational leaders today are balancing the burdens of their predecessors as well as the new dynamic of diversifying school-community needs to the best of their training and abilities.

For the most part, educational leaders did not consciously perceive the influence of their own sociocultural background and experiences on their professional interactions. It was upon reflection that the participants employed storytelling to narrate and consider examples that drew lines from their own understanding of themselves, their upbringing, and the local area to the ways in which they connected with their staff, students, and stakeholders, respectively and collectively. Further, based on the data and upon reflection, the participants saw elements of their sociocultural background as wieldable tools in their interactions with and leadership of others. For instance, some participants noted their white, maleness as something to take into consideration when interacting with female-presenting people at their school. Alternatively, the female participant was able to separate and connect her leadership within the school to her experiences as a caregiver since she knew it was socially acceptable to do so within the local community. The participants' levels of sociocultural background awareness were paired with a sense of moral agency to do right by their students and to commit to the local community within the worldview of their lived experiences.

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# Resetting, Repurposing, and Reimagining a State Organization: A Case Study

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the International Council of Professors of Educational Leadership (ICPEL) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



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*A state organization of graduate faculty teaching in educational leadership preparation programs, the Michigan Association of Professors for Educational Leadership (MAPEL), serves as the focus for this case study designed to examine its efforts to reset, repurpose and reimagine its role. Using Bolman and Deal's (2107) observations of characteristics of organizations, the authors' four frame model provided a lens for understanding how this organization's members considered their past, prepared for its present and how it might contemplate its future. The study describes what contributed to these efforts and reports data gathered from its members regarding how changes might provide new opportunities for leadership and influence at the state level as well as impact the success of programs preparing graduates to serve as school and district leaders across the state. Research questions include (1) What is the awareness level of MAPEL membership of the attempts at redesign? How do members describe this change and its impact on them? (2) What were the catalytic events that led MAPEL to engage in redesign? (3) How did the Michigan Department of Education review and approval of new leadership standards impact the perceived role of MAPEL? (4) How did the examination of the by-laws impact the perceived role of MAPEL? Given the small amount of research on the impact of state level professional organizations, the study adds to the literature and offers recommendations for establishing communities of practice between and among colleges and universities, a vehicle for program improvement which to date has been underutilized.*

**Keywords:** State organization, case study, frames

Research literature during the past twenty-five years exploring the impact of school leadership on learning has revealed that leadership matters (Ni, Y. et al., 2019), whether at the school or district level (Harris, S., 2008; Lashway, L., 2006). Studies and books have detailed the knowledge, skills and dispositions required of successful school leaders (Knapp, et al., 2014; Deal, T. et al., 2009; Wilmore, 2008; Donaldson, G., 2008) and reported on the elements crucial for inclusion in school leadership preparation programs (Anderson, E. et al., 2018; Cosner, 2018; Wallace Foundation, 2016; Crow, G.M., et al., 2012; Orr, M. T. & Orphanos, S., 2011; Darling-Hammond, L., et al., 2007; Stein, S. J., 2006; Davis, S., et al., 2005). Organizations such as the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA, 2018) and state departments of education, e.g., the Michigan Department of Education, have developed and/or recently adopted standards for the preparation of school leaders to give guidance to and requirements for university programs as well as improve program quality (Gates, S. et al., 2020).

Given the importance of developing effective leaders, another relevant avenue for research has been how university faculty in educational leadership programs might improve quality e.g., quality assurance measures, authentic candidate assessments, meeting state and national accreditation standards (Wenger, E. C. & Snyder, W. M., 2000; Richlin, L. & Cox, M.D., 2004). Of lesser interest for study has been the role that a state organization of school leadership faculty might play and the value it might add in leveraging the success of program graduates. This exploration of the role of a state organization for school leadership program faculty has the opportunity to add to the understanding and potential impact of such associations (Brown, J. S. and Duiduid, P., 1991). It also has the potential to identify a community of practice within the faculty of these education leadership preparation programs so that they may learn from each other as well as engage as stronger advocates for the programs and the students they serve.

Three factors converged to support the transformation of the state organization for faculty teaching in leadership preparation programs in the state of Michigan: the national organization of faculty in school leadership programs (the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration or NCPEA) undertaking a self-study, the revision and publication of updated national standards for the preparation of school and district level leaders (NPBEA, 2018 ), and the Michigan Department of Education's (MDE) 2019 decision to review, and if necessary, revise the standards that would guide the future approval and continued authorization of school leadership preparation programs.

According to its website, "The International Council of Professors of Educational Leadership [formerly NCPEA, now ICPEL] is committed to the practice and study of educational administration" (ICPEL website). Founded in 1947, the International Council of Professors of Educational Leadership (ICPEL) "continues its commitment to serve the interests and needs of professors of educational administration and practicing school leaders" by focusing on initiatives which:

1. Ensure the high-quality professional development of professors of educational administration.
2. Refine the knowledge bases for preparing practicing administrators and professors of educational administration.
3. Promote the application of theory and research in the field to the practice of educational administration.
4. Establish and promote a Code of Ethics for professors of educational administration.
5. Ensure access and inclusion of underrepresented groups into the professorship and administration and promote social justice in education.
6. Serve as an advocate for professors of educational administration and as an authority on critical issues.
7. Develop the administrative application of technology in the preparation and renewal of educational leaders.

8. Establish standards by which educational administration programs become certified, accredited, and approved.

The National Policy Board (NPBEA), is “a national alliance of major membership organizations committed to the advancement of school and school-system leadership. Member organizations represent the educational administration profession and collaborate to improve the preparation and practice of educational leaders at all levels” (NPBEA website). NPBEA revised the national standards for the preparation of school and district leaders in 2018. These new standards, aligned to the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL), officially replaced earlier standards developed by the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC). According to the Council of Chief State School Officers (2015) document, these new standards were “recast with a stronger, clearer emphasis on students as learners, outlining foundational principles of leadership to help ensure that each child is well-educated and prepared for the 21st century” (CCSSO, 2015, p. 2).

Young et al. (2017) speak to the importance of having clear and consistent leadership standards to guide the preparation of future school leaders. Acknowledging the importance of having standards to guide not only program preparation but also program review and accreditation, the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) assembled a task force of stakeholders in 2019 to review the Michigan standards for preparing school and district level leaders to ensure state-authorized approved programs provide “candidates with intentionally designed, research-based, leadership development experiences which build the knowledge and skills ...within authentic contexts” (www.npbea.org). At the conclusion of the review, the MDE recommended that the state of Michigan’s Board of Education adopt the 2018 NELP standards to guide these efforts.

### **Resetting, Repurposing, and Reimagining MAPEL**

The Michigan Association of Professors of Educational Leadership (MAPEL) represents university educational administration and leadership preparation programs and is affiliated with ICPEL. Founded in 1977, the MAPEL includes fifteen universities (Andrews University, Central Michigan University, Concordia University, Eastern Michigan University, Grand Valley State University, Madonna University, Michigan State University, Northern Michigan University, Oakland University, Saginaw Valley State University, University of Michigan, University of Michigan - Dearborn, University of Michigan - Flint, Wayne State University, Western Michigan University) and counts 66 individual faculty as members. Through their universities, MAPEL members serve nearly 900 school districts and 3,725 school buildings across the state’s upper and lower peninsulas and have played an important role in preparing a number of the 600 school superintendents and 4,500 school principals who lead learning in those organizations.

The national organization, ICPEL, having recently completed a process to redefine its mission, vision, values and goals, helped propel the anticipated review of its Michigan affiliate’s constitution and bylaws. A review of the proposed changes to the MAPEL constitution and bylaws set the stage for a substantive discussion of the mission, vision, values and goals of the state organization as well as strategies to effectively support the education and development of aspiring school leaders and the success of program graduates.

At the conclusion of those discussions, MAPEL had redefined the purpose of the organization as well as revised and approved the organization’s new constitution and bylaws, moving from the goal of sharing information *within* the organization to become an *outward facing* organization which:

- Develops policy positions
- Disseminates research and models best practices
- Obtains a “seat at the policy table,” recommending policy and legislative positions to local, state and national decision makers.

In order to “reset” the MAPEL organization to successfully reinvent itself as an outward-facing organization, the membership determined that work groups of members were needed to consider and then recommend how to make the transitions necessary to transform the organization. University faculty members from across the state were needed to explore these new priorities: Advancing MAPEL Policy and Legislative Advocacy; Informing Content Knowledge and Leadership Skills for Administrator Preparation Programs; Creating Field-Based Professional Learning for Continued Leadership Development for current school and district leaders; Identifying gaps in the literature on effective school leadership, conducting research and sharing findings on best practices for leadership preparation; and Developing handbooks for Field-based Clinical and Internship Experiences. These workgroups would be facilitated by members of the MAPEL Executive Board.

The work group tasked with advancing MAPEL policy and legislative advocacy has explored and informed MAPEL members about important legislative and policy issues in addition to encouraging greater participation in statewide policy-making activities. This group meets regularly to identify activities which will further the purpose of MAPEL advocacy and support. Activities to date have included:

- Gathering information for legislative and policy updates
- Expanding relationships with state administrator professional organizations
- Strengthening relationships with the Michigan Department of Education
- Circulating updates from MAPEL members serving on statewide committees
- Informing MAPEL members through monthly written updates on current policy and legislative issues
- Bringing advocacy positions to MAPEL members for consideration of adoption

These efforts have closely aligned to those of the workgroup tasked with informing content knowledge and leadership skills for school leaders. The focus of this workgroup was quickly redefined to inform, influence, and engage others such as practitioners, those in leadership preparation, and legislators by first identifying “hot topics” that needed to be addressed or needed advocacy and then focusing on a product or vehicle that would best meet that need or engage interested stakeholders, e.g., a scholarly activity, white paper, conference, or workshop. A crucial question this group explored was the support needed by current practitioners and the accountability of higher education institutions to provide it. Another topic which quickly rose to the surface was whether a common state assessment for all leadership preparation programs graduates was needed in addition to the authentic assessments already embedded in university coursework, clinical experiences and internships to indicate the student was prepared to obtain a state school administrator credential.

Thus, three subgroups organically emerged to inform, influence and engage. The first began development of a research-based Internship Handbook which spoke to quality, diversity, and higher education accountability after investigating the authentic and dynamic internship experiences across the state preparation programs. A second subgroup began discussing the pathway from preparation programs to becoming practicing school leaders with a white paper entitled, “Moving from Prep to Practice: Accountability in Leadership Preparation Programs.” The audience included current administrators to increase awareness of the preparation programs and the preparedness of leaders coming out of our programs. A third and larger group meets quarterly for updates on progress and to ensure there is not a duplication of efforts. A call is also put out regularly to the MAPEL members should they wish to be involved with a certain topic area and product creation. Future areas for action include creating additional white papers, exploring collaboration with the University Council for Education Administration (UCEA) now located in Michigan, and attracting others to the profession with activities such as a statewide *Why I Lead* conference and other recruitment events.

A third work group, creating field-based professional learning for continued leadership development, formed to identify any gaps in learning between preparatory programs and practicing

administrators in the context of a complex and dynamic educational industry. This group explored the initiative to Advance Inclusive Principal Leadership (AIPL) to consider if it might become a template for MAPEL's professional learning for pre-service principals as well as professional learning for practicing school leaders. MAPEL was approached to become one of the AIPL states for further collaboration and advocacy for the profession which will be explored further at the annual ICPEL conference in August, 2022. ICPEL and UCEA both support, along with the CCSSO, this national initiative to improve principal training and practice in serving special needs children. Other ICPEL state affiliates participating in the AIPL initiative include Ohio, Arkansas, Arizona, Georgia and Mississippi (J. Berry, personal communication, August 4, 2021).

Another early task of this workgroup was to identify content and assemble materials for review by leadership preparation programs, making MAPEL an aggregator of high-quality resources and materials in concert with other state associations.

The group identified professional learning strands which include the following:

- Effective principal leadership and communication in times of crisis
- Developing leadership capacity for practicing school administrators
- Mindfulness and care
- Early childhood learning and development
- Instructional supervision, e.g., High Leverage Teaching Practices, Universal Design for Learning
- Supervising special education teachers and paraprofessionals, e.g., PSEL/Disabilities, faculty materials
- Race, culture, and equity
- Theory to practice, e.g., case studies

A fourth work group's task was to identify gaps in the literature on effective school leadership, conduct research and share findings on best practices for leadership preparation. The purpose of this group was to develop, refine and communicate best practices through journal articles, books and book chapters and other resources for the MAPEL website.

The delineation of these various efforts quickly surfaced the need for an effective communication tool to disseminate information to MAPEL members and the national organization, ICPEL, and to the field more broadly. Developing a new and dynamic MAPEL website as a platform for this important work to engage stakeholders and support their collaboration resulted in a recommendation to develop a website, <https://miedprep.weebly.com/>, with three key functions: sharing information and resources to association members and other key stakeholders, connecting and engaging members by establishing a virtual network across the association, and collaborating through document sharing and communications to advance the association's mission and outreach.

With these developments in mind, the researchers wanted to understand these changes from the perspective of the membership. To that end, the following research questions were developed:

1. What is the awareness level of MAPEL membership of the attempts at redesign? How do members describe this change and its impact on them?
2. What were the catalytic events that led MAPEL to engage in redesign?
3. How did the MDE review and approval of new leadership standards impact the perceived role of MAPEL?
4. How did the examination of the by-laws impact the perceived role of MAPEL?

## Literature Review

A review of the literature included inquiry into the following areas of research that informed this case study: communities of practice, technical vs. adaptive change, and Bolman and Deal's four frames or perspectives on organizations.

### University Faculty Collaboration through Communities of Practice

Social constructivists emphasize the collaborative nature of learning and explain all cognitive functions as products of social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). Learning is assumed to occur in a variety of social situations. Communities of practice have the potential to provide the social setting and a powerful framework for groups of educators interested in the improvement of teaching, learning and leading.

Lave and Wenger (1991) questioned the efficacy of formal learning experiences in continuing professional development and proposed that the acquisition of knowledge and the development of skill occurs when meaning is shared, discussed, developed, and debated through participation in *communities of practice* (CoP). As defined by Wegner and Wenger-Trayner (2015), "Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (p. 1). Learning, then, is a process that takes place in a participative setting where it is mediated by differences in participant perspective.

In Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002), participants in communities of practice are described as follows:

These people don't necessarily work together every day, but they meet because they find value in their interactions. As they spend time together, they typically share information, insight, and advice. They help each other solve problems. They discuss their situations, their aspirations, and their needs. They ponder common issues, explore ideas and act as sounding boards . . . they become informally bound by the value that they find in learning together. This value is not merely instrumental for their work. It also occurs in the personal satisfaction of knowing colleagues who understand each other's perspectives and in belonging to an interesting group of people. (pp. 4-5)

According to Wegner's (1998a) theory, communities of practice share three crucial characteristics: the *domain*, the *community*, and the *practice*:

The *domain*: A domain includes members who have a shared area of interest.

The *community*: A community is built when members build relationships that allow them to engage in purposeful activities and meaningful discussions which enhance the learning or efficacy of each member.

The *practice*: Members are practitioners and they develop a shared repertoire of resources, such as techniques, stories, and experiences when sharing their practice. (Wegner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 1)

### Technical vs. Adaptive Change

One model through which organizational change is often viewed is the technical vs. adaptive leadership lens, posited by Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky (2009). A key element of the model which has close application here is the distinction between technical and adaptive change. The former depends on clear problems and solutions, a locus of the work resting on an authority figure (e.g., a leader), and smooth execution. By contrast, adaptive challenges are far more complex and even messy. These problems and solutions require new learning on the part of the stakeholders who are the locus of the work. Because of

its less definitive and ever evolving process, adaptive leadership depends on experiments and what the authors of the model would describe as smart risks.

Adaptive leadership has been widely applied as of late to areas such as the pandemic (Bagwell, 2020; Kolb, 2021), financial services (Doyle, 2017), and academic libraries (Wong and Chan, 2018).

## **Reframing Organizations**

Bolman and Deal's (2017) observations about organizations can also provide a powerful cognitive lens as MAPEL members consider its past, prepare for its present as well as contemplate its future. The authors state that what we see and do is strongly influenced by our preconceptions. They further observe that organizations are "complex", "surprising", "deceptive" and "ambiguous". In order to make sense of what is going on in an organization, they offer four perspectives, or frames, that help leaders find clarity and meaning. They also introduce the concept of reframing or "viewing situations from multiple perspectives." Bolman and Deal argue that leaders sometimes have too few ideas, a limited perspective and habitual response to the challenges which limits not only their options but effectiveness. Instead, multiple lenses allow leaders to look at old problems in a fresh way and confront challenges with new tools and move from intentions to actions. In addition, the four frames can provide the lenses to bring the organization and its challenges clearly into view instead of relying on private theories and personal judgements.

### ***The Structural Frame***

Bolman and Deal (2017) outline assumptions that underlie structural thinking: two tensions of organizational design, dividing work or differentiation and coordinating individual contributions or integration. They discuss options for designing the structure of the organization and structural imperatives to consider in determining an appropriate structure, e.g., an organization's size, age, core process, environment, goals and strategy, information technology and workforce. The authors conclude that finding the right structure is a central concern for any organization as it becomes the arrangement of roles and relationships that depict desired patterns of activities, expectations, and exchanges for employees as well as constituents. They also indicate that the organization's structure is intended to provide a means for standardization, efficiency, clarity and predictability given its goals and environment.

### ***The Human Resources Frame***

According to Bolman and Deal (2017), most think that organizations exist to serve human needs rather than the converse. However, the authors state that people and organizations need each other. Organizations need ideas, energy and talent. People need careers, salaries and opportunities. Given that interdependency, when the fit between the individual and the organization is poor, one or both suffer. A good fit benefits both the individual and the organization. Individuals find meaningful and satisfying work and organizations get the talent and energy they need to succeed.

### ***The Political Frame***

In describing the political frame, Bolman and Deal (2017) point out the limits of authority and the inevitability that resources are frequently too scarce to fulfill all demands. Thus, organizations are often arenas where groups jockey for power. As arenas, organizations have an important duty to shape the rules of the game. As actors or players, organizations are powerful tools for achieving the agenda of whoever



controls them. The authors offer two important insights regarding the political frame: goals emerge from bargaining and compromise among different interests rather than only from rational analysis at the top and that conflict becomes an inescapable, even welcomed, byproduct of everyday life. Handled properly, conflict can be a source of constant energy and renewal.

### ***The Symbolic Frame***

Organizational culture is both a product and process: an embodiment of accumulated wisdom and an ongoing source of innovation and renewal as new members challenge old ways. Bolman and Deal (2017) suggest that culture is a distinctive pattern of beliefs, values, practices and artifacts, developed over time which defines for members who they are and how they do things. The authors emphasize that from a symbolic perspective, meaning is a basic human need. Leaders in an organization can shape meaning by understanding and encouraging symbolic forms and activities to create more effective organizations.

### **Methodology**

Researchers chose a case study method to address the research questions above (Yin, 2009). The specific case under study is the redefinition and/or redesign of a professional organization, in this case MAPEL, and the phenomenon under examination is that transformation and its possible impacts. To this end, researchers developed a survey instrument using Qualtrics (see Appendix for survey questions connected to research questions).

### **Study Context**

As noted, a variety of factors converged that led MAPEL to examine its purpose with a fresh perspective. Beginning with the change in state standards from the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) standards to the National Educational Leadership Standards (NPBEA, 2018), professors in educational leadership in the state of Michigan had cause to meet on a more frequent basis. One result of this increase in contact was not only robust conversations around the standards, but also about the current role of MAPEL and what it might be. As this developed further into creating specific work groups, researchers felt it wise to capture the impact and perceptions of these changes on the membership at large.

As noted, MAPEL has 66 members statewide that serve on the faculty of 15 institutions and provide preparation programs for aspiring building and district level leaders. Historically, MAPEL has met twice per year in the fall and spring, but as a result of this work, meetings with sub groups and the full body have been more frequent, especially with the work groups described above.

### **Data Collection and Participant Selection**

The survey developed and sent to all 66 MAPEL members included an embedded consent for each participant and did not ask for a name or institution to protect confidentiality. Members were initially given three weeks to complete the survey, but after receiving an initial 12 responses, researchers decided to resend the questionnaire with an extended deadline of one week. This yielded an additional 8 participants for a total of 20 respondents representing a 30.3% response rate.

Participants, self-selected by returning the survey, were asked their academic rank, years of service in K-12 administration and higher education as follows:

**Table 1***Participant Breakdown by Rank and Experience Levels*

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Respondents at this Rank</i>	<i>Years of Experience as a faculty member of Ed Leadership</i>	<i>Respondents at this experience level</i>	<i>Years of PK12 Administrator Experience</i>	<i>Respondents at this experience level</i>
<i>Affiliate or Visiting Professor</i>	7	0-7	5	0-7	6
<i>Assistant Professor</i>	5	8-14	6	8-14	5
<i>Associate Professor</i>	4	15-21	6	15-21	5
<i>Full Professor</i>	4	21 or more	3	21 or more	4

**Findings****Awareness Level and Description of the Redesign (Research question 1)**

The most frequent themes in participant responses centered on legislative policy and advocacy as well as communication and collaboration. Stated broadly, one respondent noted that MAPEL had moved from an historical inward focus “to an outward focus on how to inform, influence and support the preparation and development of school leaders.” Another respondent emphasized MAPEL’s “importance of voice to represent the institutions at the ‘table’ and to make sure politicians, lobbyists, and policymakers know we have a voice that is influential.”

Participants also valued the increase in communication and collaboration with colleague members: “MAPEL has risen to the occasion over the last few years to bring Michigan professors of ed leadership together.” Also valued is the connection to those practicing in PK-12 education, noting that MAPEL is “more connected to PK-12 and the broader political field that surrounds it” and that “Our PK-12 leaders want and need our support and collaboration, and that support can go well beyond leadership preparation.” Another respondent captured the importance of collaboration as transforming MAPEL “from a twice a year meeting that was nice to have to much more frequent and useful interactions that I don’t want to miss.”

**Catalytic Events that Led MAPEL to Engage in Redesign (Research question 2)**

This transformation, like many, did not happen in a vacuum. Contextual events contributed and coalesced to effect this change, not the least of which was the leadership of the organization: “the current leadership was finding ways to make the organization stronger and more relevant even aside from the MDE review and approval process.” Another respondent noted that the MAPEL even seemed to be influencing MDE through its involvement, “having MAPEL leading the discussions and being involved with the MDE.”

### **Impact Review and Implementation of New Leadership Standards (Research question 3)**

Complementing the broader legislative and policy advocacy noted above, another specific and impactful event in this outward transformation was the participation of many MAPEL members in the leadership standards review for the state of Michigan with one respondent describing it directly, “The standards review process was a catalyst.” This theme was also illustrated well with another respondent who noted, “since the standards work with MDE, there is a collective commitment to impact the field as a group.” Other members felt that MAPEL has a “healthy relationship with the MDE” and that this “allowed MAPEL membership to provide input into the standards adoption.” Still others viewed the state assessment conversation as more impactful, “I am not sure the NELP (National Education Leadership Preparation) standards review process impacted the perceived role as much as the discussion of the state assessment which occurred multiple times within the process.” Even as opinions on the specific catalyst differ, MAPEL did meet more frequently during the standards review process.

### **Impact of By-law Examination on the Perceived Role of MAPEL? (Research question 4)**

Researchers were also curious as to the impact of MAPEL examining its own by-laws, and here the respondents differed. Some felt that clearly this was a factor in redefining the organization, noting that the process gave a “clearer understanding” of MAPEL or “reconfirmed the role of the organization.” Even more to the point, some noted the by-laws dialogue “moved us directly into examining our reason for being and talking about it as an organization.” Others saw this differently, however, and when asked if by-law review had an impact of transforming MAPEL simply stated, “it didn’t” or “I would say not very much.” As such, the value of this process may well have been in the eye of the beholder.

## **Discussion**

After individual and collective analysis of respondent data, researchers noted connections to the organizational theories summarized in the literature review. Communities of practice was certainly evident in that MAPEL is composed of professors with similar roles who share a common passion: to prepare educational leaders for the challenges of the work in schools and districts. Members enhanced professional relationships within work groups that formed organically. In addition, the transformation of MAPEL reflects the adaptive change model of Heifetz et al. (2009). Members engaged with each other in learning, as described in communities of practice, and the work groups can be viewed as experiments in the complex transformation of the organization.

Without question, however, using the lens of the four frames posited by Bolman and Deal brought some meaningful insights from the survey responses such as:

#### **Structural Frame:**

- Establishing closer partnerships between and among school leadership preparation programs in the state
- Becoming part of the International Council of Professors of Educational Leadership Affiliate Pilot Project
- Establishing an ongoing connection to University Council of Education Administration

#### **Political Frame:**

- Responding to factors in the political environment impacting the MAPEL constitution and bylaws by adopting an outward facing presence including development of an MAPEL website
- Establishing a stronger working relationship with the Michigan Department of Education leading to a higher profile and potentially greater impact for MAPEL

- Discussing the option of adding a mandated state assessment for aspiring school leaders

#### Symbolic Frame:

- Redefining the identity and purpose of the organization by changing the name from the Michigan Association of Professors of Educational Administration (MAPEA) to the Michigan Association of Professors of Educational Leadership (MAPEL) which paralleled the recent name change of the International Council of Professors of Educational Leadership
- The development of a website to disseminate the purpose and priorities of the organization and to keep others informed.

#### Human Resource Frame:

- Promoting participation from association members in the Michigan Department of Education's revision of the state standards for school leadership preparation programs and other state level initiatives
- Promoting active participation in the newly established MAPEL work groups reflecting the newly identified purposes, goals and activities of the organization

### **Implications and Recommendations for Research and Practice**

Bolman and Deal (2017) state that, in dealing with leadership challenges, educators frequently use only the structural or human resources lenses without considering if there are political or symbolic forces to consider. Using all four frames allows an organization, its members, and its leaders to see things that might have been overlooked as well as reframe new possibilities and opportunities, becoming more versatile and effective leaders. For MAPEL, a number of elements were at play as the organization redefined itself that benefitted from a close study of Bolman and Deal's four frames. In reviewing the survey data, members "reframed" outcomes using the perspective of the structural, human resources, political as well as the symbolic lens. Hence, using all four frames, as Bolman and Deal suggest, may provide state and national level organizations a clearer understanding of an organization's current state as well as a perspective and the clarity needed for future focus and priorities.

Furthermore, while this study focuses primarily on the connections to the four frames of Bolman and Deal, others may find additional change theories of interest. For example, a common error that Heifetz et al. (2009) points out is that leaders bring technical solutions to adaptive problems. As noted above, MAPEL appeared to avoid this as the locus of this transformation did not have a centralized authority figure, and the solutions were not fully known. Thus, the work groups serve as experiments as MAPEL continues to progress. Similarly, the Concerns Based Adoption Model (CBAM) might be another resource to bring about adaptive change. This tool helps to look at systemic implementation within an organization of a solution to a problem of practice (Meyer-Looze & Vandermolen, 2021). The Levels of Use version of the tool is able to assess the level of implementation within an organization through a series of questions (Hall, Dirksen & George, 2006). Rather than implementing technical solutions (to address adaptive problems), CBAM is able to assist the user in looking at the challenge with a more adaptive and sustainable approach. Both of these theories as well as others could be examined more closely in future research endeavors.

### **Conclusion**

As with many research and leadership journeys, this work is more of a beginning than an end. Few states under the ICPEL umbrella have sought to organize and recalibrate to this extent, but of course that does not mean they cannot. Quite the contrary, if a critical mass of state associations can become more outwardly focused and influential, it will likely benefit the field of educational leadership and stand out as

a poignant example of leadership that matters. Moreover, if the field of educational leadership can expand its collective reach and political influence, this has the potential to impact the entire field of PK-12 education and the millions of students it serves across generations. At the end of the day or in the twilight of one's career, is that not the point?

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## Appendix

### Survey Questions

#### Demographics:

Rank - Affiliate/Adjunct, Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, Full Professor

Years of service in K-12 administration

Years of service as faculty in Educational Leadership

#### Survey Questions Connected to Research Questions:

- a. As you consider the role of MAPEL over the last three to five years, have you noticed a change? If so, how would you describe that change? (RQ 1)
- b. To what degree did the MDE review and approval process of new leadership standards impact the perceived role of MAPEL? (RQ 2)
- c. Did the state and/or national accreditation process impact your perception of how MAPEL could support or enhance that work at your local institution? If so, how? (RQ 2,3)
- d. How did the examination of the by-laws impact the perceived role of MAPEL? (RQ 4)
- e. Do you anticipate MAPEL's role continuing to evolve? Why or why not? (RQ 2)
- f. What have been the lessons learned so far that would be helpful for the future of the organization? (RQ 1, 2)
- g. Do you think a closer association or connection to ICPEL benefits MAPEL? Why or why not? (RQ 2)



# A Call for Social Justice Work: How Three Women of Color Experienced Their Administrator Preparation Program to the Assistant Principalship

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the International Council of Professors of Educational Leadership (ICPEL) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



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*In this day and age, when educational administrators are required to make effective progress and academic achievement for all students, educational administrator preparational programs must equip all prospective leaders with the skill sets, knowledge, and experience to lead diverse student populations to high levels of learning and academic success. In this exploratory qualitative study, the researchers examined the lived experiences of three women of color in their educational administrator preparational program to their first administrative role as assistant principals. Selected participants participated in semi-structured interviews. A synthesis of key research on social justice education, social justice leadership, ethical leadership, and social justice work defined the researchers' definitions of social justice and social justice work. Using Starratt's (1991, 1996) multidimensional model on ethical leadership to address social justice work, the researchers found that even though there was not a pervasive theme of social justice in the program, the women felt "prepared" for their next job. Yet, participants still suggested that the program "go deeper" in addressing how to do social justice work in order to address the demands placed on all educational administrators today. Findings from this paper reveal an immediate call to action for educational administrative leadership programs to prioritize and to prepare all aspiring leaders for social justice work with a discussion on what next steps for initiating and implementing social justice work could possibly entail.*

**Keywords:** social justice work, Starratt's framework on ethical leadership, ethic of critique, ethic of justice, ethic of care, critical consciousness, organizational change

Preparing school leaders to be a positive force for making change toward a more just educational system is a challenge for leadership preparation programs. The educational landscape is changing in terms of the purpose of education, what students need to know and be able to do upon graduating, and how our society provides equitable access to education, resources, and technology for all. With profound changes in artificial intelligence, automation, and globalization shifting workforce demands, education systems and educators are needing to adapt or be left behind. Meanwhile, lessons from COVID-19 revealed the importance of being flexible in our teaching: Learning could occur anytime, anyplace even outside the confines of the classroom walls (Chen & Almarode, 2022; Pagoto et al., 2021). The pandemic emphasized the need for all students to have equal access to broadband and the importance of addressing students' mental and social needs, as well as the importance of building pathways between school, home, and community to ensure that learning is sustainable, meaningful, and relevant to all students (Chen & Almarode, 2022).

In this day and age, when schools are held accountable for making effective progress, academic growth, and achievement for all students, future educational leaders must be ready to lead diverse student populations to high levels of learning and academic success while at the same time being responsive to the social, emotional, mental, and academic needs of all students. Therefore, aspiring principals must be prepared to deliver academic programs that are effective in closing the achievement gaps for all student groups, including students from low-income families, and even to address the effects of the digital divide. Educational leadership programs must show aspiring leaders how to address issues of diversity, equity, and social justice as well as how to sustain this type of change. The work of social justice involves more than just delivering professional development on multiculturalism or inclusion in schools: It involves a more complex thought process and a multilayered approach.

### **Statement of the Problem: Complexities of Social Justice Work**

A synthesis of related literature reveals that social justice work for educational administrators is both complex and complicated (Capper & Young, 2014; DeMatthews, 2014, 2015; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Furman, 2012; Guillaume et al., 2020; Jean-Marie et al., 2009; McKenzie et al., 2008; Ryan, 2006; Turhan, 2010). Aspiring leaders must be cognizant of the inequities first and be able to raise that same level of consciousness to all school members (Guillaume et al., 2020). The initiation and engagement of this type of moral dialogue is imperative to the work of social justice and of being an ethical leader (Sergiovanni, 1992; Starratt, 2004). In asking all members to examine their own biases and biases in the system that may impact the academic achievement and growth of all students, it is inevitable that emerging leaders will face resistance and must know how to navigate from the potential pitfalls and obstacles (Theoharis, 2007). A multistep process is thus required of educational leaders involved with social justice work (Furman, 2012; Guillaume et al., 2020; Jean-Marie et al., 2009). How one leader chooses to facilitate this moral dialogue and implement change may look differently than another leader's path even though both leaders are working toward the same outcome of eliminating the injustices and inequities of the system (Turhan, 2010). For example, an internal leader who has moved up the ranks to become the new principal may take on a different approach for confronting issues of inequity as opposed to another leader who has come from the "outside" and is unfamiliar with the ways of her new community. Because of the complex nature of social justice work, it is important to prepare all emerging leaders with the mind frame, skill sets, and experiences to do this type of work successfully and to ensure its sustainability.

## Significance of the Study

Three aspects of this paper make it distinct from the body of research on social justice in educational leadership programs. First, we examined the lived experiences of three women of color who successfully completed their school leadership preparation program and secured their first administrative position after the completion of their program as the unit of analysis. Previous studies on social justice leadership have focused on principals, administrators, or leaders who have already been established in their schools as the unit of analysis (Chiu & Walker, 2007; DeMatthews, 2014, 2015; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Furman, 2012; Theoharis, 2007). In most cases, it is rare for a teacher and/or a teacher leader who is exiting out of an educational leadership preparational program to secure a principalship without having prior, successful experience as an associate principal, dean, and/or assistant principal. By shedding light on the lived experiences of three women of color in their leadership program and their first administrative role as assistant principals, we hope to “make visible aspects of social relations and of the natural world that are unavailable from dominant perspectives, and in doing so...generate the kinds of questions that will lead to [a] more complete and true account” (Bowell, 2022, para. 2). We recognize that these women offer certain realities that dominant groups may not have experienced because of their race and gender. By giving voice to their perspectives, our goal was not to construct feminist standpoint theory (Bowell, 2022); rather, we hope to gain a more holistic approach for addressing how to do social justice work successfully and how to prepare aspiring leaders for their first administrative role.

Second, the proposition of a multilayered approach in educational administrator preparation programs provided the frame for this study. Similar to the works of Furman (2012) and Theoharis (2007), we argue that “doing social justice work” is more than just having a critical lens to the injustices in a system. It is also understanding where to begin, how best to navigate the obstacles, and how to work with others to bring about this type of awareness and substantive change. For example, how might a new administrator go about confronting issues of inequity and injustice, particularly if these practices are the result of long-standing traditions and beliefs in her school community? What does this work entail, particularly for an administrator in her first administrative role? Where would she begin? How might she do this work in such a way not to alienate others but to bring them along in order to promote greater equity and excellence for all students?

At its core, justice, diversity, and equity is about the care, respect, and compassion of human beings (Sergiovanni, 1992; Starratt, 2005). Undergirding the work of social justice is the notion that aspiring educational administrators must learn how to “establish an ethical school environment, in which education can take place ethically” (Starratt, 1991, p. 187). Emerging school leaders will make individual choices regarding individual circumstances that occur in a larger ethical context. Educational administrator programs are therefore responsible for preparing future leaders how to effectively lead and manage an educational organization that serves a higher moral purpose; that is, “the nurturing of the human, social, and intellectual growth of the youngsters” (Starratt, 1991, p. 187). Research (e.g., Guillaume et al., 2020; see also McKenzie et al., 2008; Theoharis, 2007) contends that a deeper understanding of what is all involved, specifically the ways in which leaders enact justice, the resistance they face in the work, and how leaders continue to sustain the work of equity and justice are what aspiring leaders need to know to be better prepared to implement, lead, and sustain this type of change. As a first step, it is important to understand how aspiring leaders hear and operationalize what social justice means and looks like while in their educational leadership preparation programs. Next, it is important to determine if what they have learned in their program has helped them to be successful in their first administrative role.

Third, while there is substantial research in the areas of social justice education (Bell, 1997; Cho, 2017; Cochran-Smith, 1999, 2004; Dover, 2009; Gau, 2005; and Hackman, 2005) social justice work and

social justice leadership (Canli, 2019; Capper & Young, 2014; Chiu & Walker, 2007; DeMatthews, 2014, 2015; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Furman, 2012; Guillaume et al., 2020; Kemp-Graham, 2015; Marshall, 2004; McKenzie et al., 2008; Theoharis, 2007; Turban, 2010) and even on ethical leadership (Enrich et al., 2015, Feng-I, 2011; Ingram & Flumerfelt, 2009; Langlois et al., 2012; Sergiovanni, 1992; Shapiro & Gross, 2013; Starratt, 1991, 1996, 2003a, 2003b, 2004, 2005, Stefkovich & Begley, 2007), there appears to be an absence of studies that specifically delineates the differences between what ethical leadership and what social justice leadership mean in terms of “doing social justice work” in educational leadership preparational programs. While the purpose of this paper is not to purport if one type leadership (i.e., ethical or social justice leadership) or one type of model (see Brown, 2004; Capper et al., 2006; Furman, 2012; McKenzie et al., 2008) is better suited for preparing aspiring administrators to do the work of social justice than the other, by using Starratt’s (1991, 1996) multidimensional framework as a mechanism for addressing social justice work, this paper supports the research (Capper & Young, 2014; Furman, 2012; Jean-Marie et al., 2009) that administrator preparation programs need to take a more holistic approach of looking at what all is involved in “doing social justice work.” Arguably, Jean-Marie et al. (2009) contends that social justice is just emerging in educational leadership programs. With changing demographics in schools and more demands placed on educational leaders today, “leadership preparation programs should promote opportunities for critical reflection, leadership praxis, critical discourse, and develop critical pedagogy related to issues of ethics, inclusion, democratic schooling, and social justice” (p. 20). Only then will future leaders know how to implement, navigate, and sustain this type of change (Furman, 2012; Jean-Marie et al., 2009; McKenzie et al., 2008). In the next section, we turn to a body of research that is pertinent to our study.

## **Conceptual Framework**

### **Defining Social Justice**

Defining social justice is not easy: It does not have a specific structure or only one solution (Turhan, 2010; Furman, 2012). According to Turhan (2010), social justice is based on two guiding principles with the first, emphasizing “the individual’s right to choose their good and right, and the second...reveal[ing] that everyone has equal opportunities pursuing this good and right” (p. 1358; see also Strike, 1999). In an effort to attain both of these foundational beliefs, social justice and the democratic community become an ideal and a moral purpose to achieve. Therefore, to reach this ultimate goal of social justice, the work is on-going, and it may look differently depending on situation and context (McKenzie et al., 2008; Turban, 2010). Because the ideal of social justice is never fully actualized, in doing this ethical work, social justice also becomes a process. As Bell (1997) suggests, “the process for attaining the goal of social justice...should be democratic and participatory, inclusive and affirming of human agency and human capacities for working collaboratively to create change” (p. 3).

Because social justice work is multifaceted and has different approaches (Turhan, 2010), terms such as equity, equal opportunity, multicultural education, and diversity are often associated with social justice work (Cho, 2017; Furman 2012; Guillaume et al., 2019). In spite of its plural meanings, a common understanding exists among leadership scholars of social justice: They identify social justice with “focus[ing] on the experiences of marginalized groups and inequities in educational opportunities and outcomes” (Furman, 2012, p. 194). According to Evans (2007), researchers of social justice “support the notion that educational leaders have a social and a moral obligation to foster equitable school practices, processes and outcomes for learners of different racial, economic, cultural, disability, and sexual orientation backgrounds” (p. 250).

In this paper, we adopt Bell's (1997), Furman's (2012), and Evans' (2007) conceptual understanding of social justice. First, social justice is both an ideal and a goal to achieve. Second, the work of social justice calls for a democratic and inclusive process that involves people working together to bring out this substantive change (Bell, 1997). Third, the work of social justice examines the inequities and marginalization in schools and student outcomes (Furman, 2012). Finally, we believe that educational leaders play a crucial role and have a moral and ethical responsibility in making meaningful and positive changes in both education and the lives of traditionally marginalized and oppressed students (Evans, 2007).

### **Defining Social Justice Leadership**

Recognizing that social justice is a process "built on respect, care, recognition, and empathy" (Theoharis, 2007, p. 223; Bell, 1997), we support the notion that social justice is not separate from the work of educational leaders (Bogotch, 2002; Evans, 2007; Starratt, 2003a, 2003b, 2004, 2005; Theoharis, 2007). Because educational leaders are involved with social justice, social justice leadership calls for a deep and critical examination of those systems of power and privilege that give rise to social inequalities. Social justice leaders therefore recognize their role within an oppressive system (Guillaume et al., 2020) and make issues of "race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions ...central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision (Theoharis, 2007, p. 223). In raising the levels of critical consciousness of all school members (Guillaume et al., 2020; McKenzie et al., 2008), social justice leaders work to bring about change on school policies and practices that are oppressive and unfair, replacing them with ones that are more suitable and fairer culturally (DeMatthews, 2014, 2015). Social justice leaders work toward eliminating inequities, discrimination, and injustices in order to bring about impactful change and a greater good for all (Turhan, 2010). Finally, social justice leaders recognize the importance of embracing "inclusivity" and work with others to institutionalize and sustain social justice in their schools (DeMatthews, 2014, 2015; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Ryan 2006).

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Starratt's Framework on Ethical Leadership**

In doing social justice work, it is inevitable that aspiring administrators will encounter moral dilemmas that will require them to make ethical decisions. Sergiovanni (1992) argues that anytime there is a power imbalance somewhere, ethics are involved. At its core, the researchers assert that social justice is about redressing the injustices and inequities, and eliminating marginalization in schools. It is about restoring the balance of power to all students and "creating an ethical environment for the conduct of education" (Starratt, 1991, p. 187). Building upon the challenge that social justice work cannot be separated from the practices of educational leadership (Bogotch, 2002; Theoharis, 2007), Starratt's (1991, 1996, 2004) theoretical framework on ethical leadership provides future administrators with the critical lens to be present of such inequities and to learn how to engage in the moral dialogue, examination, and self-reflection on what it means to be a leader "doing social justice work."

Foundational to the work on social justice, ethical leadership, and developing an ethical school is Starratt's extensive research (1991, 1996, 1998, 2003a, 2003b, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2011, 2012; Sergiovanni et al., 2014) on what this moral stance means and looks like for schools, teachers, leaders, and future administrators and educational leadership programs. According to Starratt's framework (1991, 1996), the three themes (i.e., the ethic of critique, the ethic of justice, and the ethic of care) are not discrete. They

are interrelated with one another with each theme complementing and enriching each other to offer a more comprehensive and multidimensional foundation.

The ethic of critique assumes a point of view about social justice and human rights and about the way communities ought to govern themselves. The ethic of justice assumes an ability to perceive injustice in the social order as well as some minimal level of caring about relationships in the social order. The ethic of caring does not ignore the demands of the community governance issues, but claims that caring is the ideal fulfillment of all social relationships, even though most relationships among members of a community function according to a more remote form of caring. (Starratt, 1991, p. 198)

### ***Ethic of Critique***

For example, the ethic of critique focuses on the inconsistencies and inequalities in both schools and society. This theme asks leaders to consider “*who controls, who legitimates, and who defines*” (Starratt, 1991, p. 199) in order to create a more just and equitable environment for all members. This ethic calls for administrators to fight and to alter institutionalized inequities, discrimination, and injustices that benefit a few students and harm many more. While the ethic of critique demands action on the inequities of an institution, it often falls short of offering a complete approach (Starratt, 1991, 1996).

### ***Ethic of Justice***

The ethic of justice provides a roadmap on how to reconstruct the social order that the ethic of critique has criticized. The ethic of justice responds to the question of how shall stakeholders govern themselves. This particular theme is concerned with equity, equality, and fairness of an action. It demands school leaders to act accordingly to their duties by respecting all stakeholder’s equal rights and adopting appropriate processes, policies, and professional codes that aide its members to act fairly and to govern themselves justly.

### ***Ethic of Care***

As social justice work is about people and the treatment of people, the ethic of care asks leaders to think responsibly of how their decisions impact their relationships with individual stakeholders. This theme “postulates a level of caring that honors the dignity of each person and desires to see the person enjoy a fully human life” (Starratt, 1991, p. 195). It ensures that the processes and decisions are aligned with the needs of individual stakeholders, and not for personal motives. It places the relationships of community members at the core of decisions and asks leaders to demonstrate their concerns for others when making such decisions.

This multidimensional frame offers a more holistic approach for understanding the dynamic nature of social justice work and raises for aspiring leaders the necessary questions to contemplate when doing this type of complicated work. The intermingling of each theme provides emerging leaders with a rich human response to the uncertain ethical situations that they will encounter while enacting social justice in their schools. We use Starratt’s (1991, 1996) multidimensional model on ethical leadership as the theoretical basis for understanding how participants operationalized social justice work while in their program and in their first administrative role.

## Methodology

A qualitative approach provided us with the most powerful means to gather the perceptions of three women of color and how they operationalized social justice work while in their program and to identify their level of preparedness for their first administrative role. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), qualitative research is prevalent in education research as its “purpose is to *understand* how people make sense of their lives and their experiences” (p. 24). Two research questions served as guideposts for our paper:

1. In what ways was the theme of social justice embedded throughout the program?
2. In what ways did this leadership program prepare students for their first administrative role?

### Purposeful Sampling and Participants

We purposely chose our educational preparation leadership program to evaluate because of our personal commitment to its success and to our students. Purposeful sampling was used to ensure that the voices of an unrepresented group were captured by program builders. To select participants, five criteria were employed. All participants (a) identified themselves as racial and gender minorities, (b) were taught by the same instructor, (c) had successfully completed their program, (d) had passed their School Leaders Licensure Assessment (SLLA) before or upon completion of the program, and (e) had obtained their first administrative role prior to or within a year after exiting the program in August, 2019. The population of interest was the twenty students enrolled in the first author’s (LC’s) cohort. Out of the twenty students, five met all criteria. However, only three participated in the study. Table 1 provides a graphic representation of the participants’ gender, race, years of teaching, and position of their first administrative role.

**Table 1**  
*Background Information of Participants*

Name	Gender	Race	Years of Teaching	First Administrative Role
Agatha	Female	Black	12	Elementary School Assistant Principal
Betty	Female	Black	8	Middle School Assistant Principal
Cathy	Female	Black	9	High School Assistant Principal

*Note.* Agatha, Betty, and Cathy are pseudonyms. Cathy changed jobs after her first year as an administrator. She received a promotion and became a director of operations in a middle school in another division.

### Description of the Program

In this educational leadership certificated program, twenty-one graduate credits are delivered to graduate students in three consecutive semesters (i.e., Fall, Spring, and Summer). Abiding by the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL), this one-year program is fully accredited. Table 2 outlines the courses in this program.

**Table 2**  
*Courses for X Leadership Certificated Program*

Semester	Course Number	Course Title	Credits
Fall 2018	PEDU 504	Educational Leadership	3
	PEDU 620	School Law	3
	PEDU 690	Internship in Educational Leadership	1
Spring 2019	PEDU 625	School Finance	3
	PEDU 671	Supervision and Evaluation	3
	PEDU 690	Internship in Educational Leadership	1
Summer 2019	PEDU 628	School Personnel Administration	3
	PEDU 629	School Operations and Management	3
	PEDU 690	Internship in Educational Leadership	1
		School Leaders Licensure Assessment	0

As this is a postgraduate-level endorsement program, students must have a master's prior to entering. At the end of the year, students apply for their administrative licensure after successfully completing their coursework, internship requirements, and passing the SLLA.

In 2018-2019, there were nine cohorts between twelve to twenty students each. To this day, this endorsement program abides by this model: Students and their instructors are grouped by area sites; each cohort is taught by three professors. Each professor is assigned to teach three courses throughout the year. Students receive instruction through a hybrid learning model: They work both asynchronously through the online platform Canvas and are required to attend fourteen face-to-face sessions that are held on Saturdays. In these sessions, students attend a three-hour morning class and a three-hour afternoon class. The instructor who is in charge of the internship class meets with students individually in the morning or in the afternoon. In this study the cohort consisted of two instructors, who were white males, and one instructor was an Asian female. Each instructor had more than twenty years of teaching and administrator experience.

### **Data Collection – Interviews**

Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews on December, 2020 and November, 2021. The first set of interviews occurred in December, 2020 after a couple of months when participants had exited out of the program and were immersed in their first administrative role while the second set of interviews occurred in November, 2021 after participants had one full year of being an administrator. The first author (LC) interviewed all three participants using Zoom, an online platform, in December, 2020 and November, 2021. Interviews lasted from thirty to forty minutes. Table 3 highlights the first set of interview questions aligned to research question one (RQ1) and to research question two (RQ2).

**Table 3**  
*First Set of Interview Questions*

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RQ1: In what ways was the theme of social justice embedded in the program?



Q4: How do you define social justice?

Q5: Do you think that the theme of social justice was infused in the program? If so, how was it infused? If not, where could it have been infused in the program?

Q6: Did you feel the program addressed the questions of equity, diversity, and respect for all human differences?

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RQ2: In what ways did this leadership program prepare students for their first administrative role?

Q8: As you do this work, do you feel like your preparation was adequate?

Q9: In what ways did you feel the program prepared you for your first administrative role?

Q10: Did you find the program to be rigorous enough to challenge you? If so, how? If not, why?

Q11: Do you think you are prepared for the next phase of your career? Why? Why not?

Q12: What other insights and/or recommendations do you have for program builders?

Q13: For this particular program, especially from the lens of helping other female leaders of color matriculate successfully, is there anything else we should have focused more on and/or spent more time on?

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*Note.* Questions one (Q1), two, three, and seven provided background information and a context for this program. Responses to these questions are found in Findings. Q1: Why did you want to become a school administrator? What is the story behind that? Q2: Do you think that a professional learning community was established and fostered in the program? Q3: How would you describe the culture of the cohort? Q7: How important was it for you to have professors with various backgrounds teach the courses?

Table 4 highlights the second set of interview questions aligned to RQ1 and RQ2.

**Table 4**

*Second Set of Interview Questions*

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RQ1: In what ways was the theme of social justice embedded in the program?

Q3: How do you define social justice?

Q4: Do you think that the theme of social justice was infused in the program? If so, how was it infused? If not, where could it have been infused in the program?

Q5: Were there particular courses or activities in the coursework that helped with your

understanding of social justice work? If so, what were those activities or particular courses?

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RQ2: In what ways did this leadership program prepare students for their first administrative role?

Q2: In what ways did this leadership program prepare you for your first administrative job?

Q6: In what ways did the program prepare you for your work in social justice as a new leader?

Q7: Have you faced resistance in attempting to do social justice work as a new leader? If so, what did this look like?

Q8: What other insights and/or recommendations do you have for program builders?

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*Note.* To verify findings, Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4, and Q8 from Table 4 are the same questions found in Table 3 but in different order. Q5 is a new question and a follow-up question to RQ1. Q6 and Q7 are new questions and follow-up questions to RQ2.

### **Role of Researchers**

The role of the first author (LC) was that of a participant observer as she was immersed in the setting and absorbed in the work and experiences of her students (Patton, 2015). The other authors (DG and ST-A) were instructors in the leadership programs but had different students. Because the first author was Agatha's, Betty's, and Cathy's instructor, she was mindful of her positional authority. To avoid any conflict of interests, interviews occurred only after IRB approval and when participants had exited out of the program. Before the interviews occurred, the first author provided Agatha, Betty, and Cathy with a full explanation of the study and informed them that participation was voluntary. To ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of participants, pseudonyms are used in this paper.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Prior to analyzing interview data, we checked all transcripts for accuracy, established common procedural steps for analyzing interview data, and used a common template for organizing codes and emerging categories (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). These initial conversations occurred on email. We then analyzed the interview data independently, and identified codes and categories using steps as outlined by Harry et al. (2005) and Anfara et al. (2002) and constant comparative analysis, which "occurs as the data are compared and categories and their properties emerge or are integrated together" (Anfara et al, 2002, p. 32).

After data were coded (first iteration), we convened on Zoom to discuss how we had derived our codes. In discussing what words, patterns, or behaviors stood out, we clarified the properties for each code; some codes were condensed into new ones. With each point of difference, we debated and clarified until we agreed on the characteristics of the code. After developing intercoder agreement, we reviewed our data independently for further coding (J. W. Creswell & J. D. Creswell, 2018).

In keeping with constant comparative analysis, some categories were broken down further into subcategories (Harry et al., 2005). As coding derived from the first to the second reiteration, several themes were generated, moving coding to interpretation. In formulating our findings independently, we

looked for patterns and regularities, as well as paradoxes and irregularities based on deductive reasoning. Although we used both an inductive and deductive process in analyzing the interview data, our goal was not to develop grounded theory rather to generate themes (Anfara et al., 2002). We used Starratt's (1991, 1996) theoretical lens on ethical leadership to compare our findings. If a theme was rare or if there was evidence contrary to the pattern of a code or theme, we noted it in our results. We then returned a second time to discuss and to compare our results with one another.

### ***Rigor of the Study***

To increase the rigor of our study, we designated a series of steps. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative researchers should use at least two strategies in any given study to enhance validity, and designate a procedure for intercoder agreement to build reliability of findings. In this article, we employed six out of nine recognized steps to enhance the overall validity of our study from the researcher's, participant's, and reader's lens (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Further, we established a procedure to cross-check codes. Steps are listed below.

**Researcher's Lens.** To increase our study's validity from the researcher's lens, we clarified our biases and presented disconfirming evidence (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Prior to interviewing the participants, the first author practiced reflexivity to be mindful "of the cultural, political, social, linguistic, and economic origins of [her] own perspective and voice as well as the perspective and voices of those [she] interviewed (Patton, 2015, p. 20). Prior to data analysis, we reflected on our own biases and experiences that we brought to this study. Any evidence that ran counter to the themes was noted in results.

**Participant's Lens.** To increase our study's validity from the participant's perspective, we employed member checking, and the first author spent a prolonged time in the field (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Agatha, Betty, and Cathy were invited to review, critique, and comment on the analysis and interpretation of the data to ensure for accuracy of findings. As the participants' course instructor, the first author spent at least two years with participants, and trust was built over time. According to J. W. Creswell and J. D. Creswell (2018), "the more experience that a researcher has with participants in their setting, the more accurate or valid will be the findings" (p. 201).

**Reader's Lens.** Finally, to enhance our study's validity from the reader's perspective, we used thick description to convey findings and an external auditor with demonstrated expertise in both qualitative research and research methodology to analyze and to provide feedback on the entire study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To improve our study's reliability, the first author created a detailed record of procedural steps (see Yin, 2018) and developed intercoder agreement. Codes and results were cross-checked and reviewed at least twice. All of the aforementioned steps helped to build validity and reliability in our study.

### **Findings**

Descriptive statements containing codes and categories in italics, quotations from participants highlighting key themes, and tables were used to present our results.

#### **Part One: A Brief Synopsis of the Participants and the Program**

##### ***Strong Instructional Background and Disposition for Leadership***

To begin with, Agatha, Betty, and Cathy came from rich backgrounds. They identified themselves as minorities because of their gender and race. They taught the same subject, in the same school, but in different grade levels. Agatha, Betty, and Cathy are in their early thirties with at least eight or more years of teaching experience. Each woman had received multiple teaching awards and was recognized by her administrators and peers as an *excellent teacher* with a focus on *high achievement and growth for all students*. Each participant held *leadership positions*, such as a grade-level chair, a department chair, or a leader in the community. All women had someone who mentored and encouraged them to become administrators. When asked why they had wanted to be a school administrator, each woman saw *leadership as a way to make positive changes for the “lives of all students.”*

### ***A Culture of Care, Respect, and Diversity***

In describing the culture of the program, Agatha, Betty, and Cathy shared that a professional learning community had been established based on the core values of “*respect*,” “*care*,” “*diversity*,” and *valuing of different perspectives*. Cathy explained, “I would say that, within our cohort, everybody seemed to get along and respect everybody’s views and opinions on things. It was a pretty diverse group when we think about background...It was a diverse culture.”

### ***A Culture of Authenticity and Learning***

All women felt *comfortable* engaging in “*genuine*” and “*authentic*” conversations with their peers and instructors because a culture of “*acceptance*” and of feeling “*valued and heard*” had been established. They believed that all members in their cohort had “*learned*” by *listening to each other’s perspectives* and that conversations were *relevant, meaningful, and “usable.”* Betty stated:

I felt like it was professional, but I also feel like it was real. It was genuine and authentic, and I think that together, it made a great experience. I think, every time we walked out of class, ‘We’re like, okay, we can use this.’ It wasn’t just some random, arbitrary information passed off. It was usable, and it was said and done in such a way that allowed us to grow. And so, overall, the culture was just one of acceptance...But you know, even though we didn’t always agree, it was open enough that you knew each person could grow and gain something from it.

### ***Learning From Professors with Diverse Leadership Styles, Backgrounds, and Experiences***

All three women felt that it was essential to have professors with varying *leadership styles, backgrounds, and experiences* teach their courses so that they could *learn from them and their lived administrative experiences*. They found these conversations to be “*useful*” and *relevant* in their present-day work as assistant principals. Cathy noted:

Our professors did a good job with kind of standing on their soapboxes and telling us the real deal, which helped because they were transparent. I think it was extremely important to have people who have first walked in your shoes did what you’ve done. And that came from different places because sometimes having that lens of I’m not from here, but I see that this is a problem, definitely helps.

### ***Having a Female Minority Instructor Helped to Create a Greater Sense of Belonging and Validation for Being in this Role***

Two other themes also generated from Agatha’s, Betty’s, and Cathy’s responses. First,

having an instructor who was both female and a person of color helped them feel a *greater sense of belonging*. Second, it *validated their feelings for pursuing a leadership position* as they saw leadership dominated by “White men.” Agatha stated:

I think it was very important to have professors from different backgrounds. If I had walked into that room, and there had just been three White men, I don’t think I would have felt at ease. You know, from where I come from, it’s already in that place of privilege of being older White men. I think my mind probably would have been blocked.

So, having an Asian female instructor was very good because I probably only had one other Asian teacher that I know of PERIOD. In the 12 years that I have been [at my school], I have seen only one Asian teacher, and she was of Indian descent. I think that’s something we need to see more of, to know that other people out there exist besides you know, the White man. When I think of my principals and administrators, I think of White male leadership. And then in the teaching environment, it’s dominated by White women, so where’s the balance?

### ***Feeling a Sense of Fellowship Through Conversations About Race and Gender***

Equally important for these women was to *hear and engage in conversations with what leadership felt and looked like from the lens of a female administrator of color* and to *listen and discuss issues that she dealt with pertaining to her race and gender while in her leadership role*. These conversations allowed participants to feel *more connected* and a *greater sense of fellowship and belonging*. As Betty reflected:

Those conversations were important to me. You know, you always talked about your experiences growing up and some of the treatment you faced coming into school systems, and I respected that because that’s more aligned with my experiences. Even though I might have been born here, I feel like sometimes I’m navigating through a land that’s not my own. So it was very important for all of us to see multiple sides of something because then it makes what you are going through okay. It’s like, ‘Okay. Well, I’m not the only one that’s experiencing this.’ It’s okay to have struggles talking with higher-ups who don’t necessarily see things my way or don’t have my shared experience or didn’t grow up with the background that I had. You know, having more people whom you can talk to that and who’ve experienced that was super important to us.

Table 5 summarizes key lessons from our findings.

**Table 5**  
*Lessons from Findings in Part One*

Lesson One	Prior to any instruction, it is important to set the tone and to establish <i>a culture of care, respect, and diversity</i> so that all students can feel <i>comfortable</i> and <i>safe</i> in expressing their feelings; challenging each other’s thoughts and beliefs; and engaging in critical conversations about issues of race, marginalization, and inequities that exist in schools and society.
Lesson Two	Having a <i>diversity</i> of students and instructors is important. It is essential to have both instructors and students who are <i>diverse in gender, racial backgrounds, and experiences so that students can learn and gain experiences from others</i> .
Lesson Three	Race and gender matter. They help define who you are and your identity. For these three women, it was invaluable for them to have a <i>female instructor of color</i> who

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was *transparent* and who *discussed issues pertaining to her race and gender in her leadership role*. These discussions helped to *address their own concerns and questions* about their place and role in leadership, particularly as they saw leadership dominated by *“White men.”* These conversations cultivated a *greater sense of belonging and of fellowship* in doing leadership work.

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*Note.* Major categories and codes are italicized.

## **Part Two: Findings From RQ1**

Next, we explore how social justice was embedded in the program.

### ***Social Justice as Equity and Excellence For All***

To begin with, Agatha, Betty, and Cathy defined social justice as *“equal treatment” for all, “equality,” “fairness for everyone,” “truest form of equity,” “equity for all,”* and *“excellence for all.”* They described social justice work as both *a goal and a process with action steps*. Betty stated:

Social justice is about equal treatment, regardless of someone’s ethnicity and then also the laws, practices, and belief systems that are in place to make sure that that equality takes place. And when it doesn’t, what are the measures that will happen to make sure that basic laws and rights are provided to all, to anyone, regardless of what they look like?

### ***Inequities in Society and Schools Exist***

Agatha, Betty, and Cathy were *critically aware* that *“equity and excellence for all” does not exist for all people*. As Cathy explained, *“If we’re looking at social justice in the educational realm, that kind of rolls back to the fight to make sure that everybody’s voice is heard regardless of their nationality or race.”*

### ***Being Critical Conscious of Race and Racism***

Therefore, to ensure that all people are afforded with the *“truest form of equity and excellence,”* they saw the importance of *“creating a sense of urgency”* in which educational leaders are *critically conscious of issues of race and racism in society and in their schools, work collaboratively with all school members to eliminate racial inequities, and create opportunity gaps for people and students of color*. As Agatha shared:

Social justice is based around equity. And just being able to have that balance of you know, not just wealth, but rights are equitable, and opportunities are equitable for all. I feel like the biggest thing that we have right now is this opportunity gap for a lot of People of color...I feel like a lot of inequities can be eliminated or lessened by working together to close the opportunity gaps for people and students of color.

In her second interview, Agatha added:

I feel like in a lot of the world and school systems today, we will say we want things to be equitable, but I know and maybe because I am a Black person, I do believe all lives can’t matter until BLACK LIVES ALSO MATTER.

## ***Social Justice and Social Justice Work Not Clearly Embedded in the Program***

According to Agatha, Betty, and Cathy, social justice was not *“explicitly stated” in the program*; rather, if social justice had been discussed, it stemmed from *conversations brought forth by their professors and through project-based learning (PBL)*. When asked if the program had touched upon questions or issues on equity, diversity, and respect for all human differences, they responded that it was the *instructors who brought forth these topics through conversations and class activities*. While they felt that the conversations on equity, diversity, and social justice were *relevant* and *“useful,”* they believed that these discussions had *“only scratched the surface.”* As Betty articulated:

I would have liked to have even more conversations about social justice and social justice work because, you know, especially as a woman of color, a Black woman going into an area that doesn’t quite look like me, being able to know how to leverage, how to have courageous conversations, how to make sure that my voice is being heard, how to make sure that all students are really being considered at all times, and not just what someone else wants for them to be or to maintain the status quo.

I wanted to have more of these conversations and the opportunity to say, ‘How do you operate in a White man’s world and still know that you not going to lose yourself for making the changes you need to make on behalf of all students and not being blackballed in the process?’ ...Students need to be successful and then, ‘How can we, especially as people of color, communicate and do that in a way that is seen and heard by everyone?’

Table 6 identifies the themes on social justice and doing social justice work that were not addressed in the program.

**Table 6**

*Themes on Social Justice and Social Justice Work (SWJ) Not Addressed in the Program*

Themes	Questions on Social Justice and Social Justice Work
<b>Clear Definition of Social Justice and Social Justice Work (SJW)</b>	What does this <i>work look like and entail</i> ?  <i>Where and how do I begin?</i>  How do I bring about <i>change that is more inclusive of all school and community members</i> rather than <i>appearing to be divisive while doing social justice work</i> ?
<b>Understanding What SJW Looks Like for an Aspiring Black Female Leader</b>	What <i>resistance</i> could I face as an <i>aspiring Black female leader in a culture that is dominated by “White male leadership?”</i>  What <i>landmines</i> do I avoid? How do I <i>successfully navigate</i> them?
<b>Understanding What SJW Looks Like for a Black Female Assistant Principal</b>	If faced with <i>“discipline policies that I must adhere to,”</i> but are in <i>direct conflict with my ethical values, what do I do?</i> <i>“How do I navigate this?”</i> <i>“What’s the balance?”</i>

What do “*courageous conversations*” look like with teachers whom I supervise or even with those who supervise me when confronted in a situation that “*is not good for kids*?”

How do I have these *conversations in such a way for people to really hear me* when “*they “don’t look like me” or “have not had the same experiences as me?”*”

If I am addressing *issues of race, racism, and marginalization*, how do I know if people will “*hear me?*” Will I be “*blackballed in the process?*”

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*Note.* Themes are bolded in the first columns. Codes and categories aligned to each theme are found in the second column in italics. Statements containing codes and categories are presented in the form of questions with participants’ exact words in quotations.

### ***Starratt’s Framework – Still to Be Actualized***

Next, in comparing our findings to Starratt’s (1991, 1996) framework on ethical leadership, we found that while *the ethic of care was present, the ethics of critique and of justice were missing* from the program. As Agatha, Betty, and Cathy suggested, this program needed further development on 1) *critically examining the systems of power and privilege that give rise to inequities in the school system* and 2) *addressing the work involved when moving toward more equitable outcomes for all students*. Although participants did not study Starratt’s (1991, 1996) framework, their two suggestions align to Starratt’s (1991) ethic of critique and ethic of justice. For example, when *critically examining the inequities in school systems*, one is using Starratt’s (1991) theme of critique “to confront the moral issues involved when schools disproportionately benefit some groups in society and fail others” (p. 190). In *reconstructing a blueprint for a more just and ethical social order*, one employs Starratt’s (1991) theme of justice to reflect on the structures and practices that “serve both the common good and the rights of the individuals in the school” (p. 194).

Conversely, we found that while *social justice was not being defined in the program*, the theme of “*doing what’s right by all students*” was immersed throughout the program. For example, Agatha, Betty, and Cathy learned about the *importance of cultivating a positive school culture with all members of the school community*, the *impact of effective communication in building trust*, and the *value of developing authentic relationships with all school members* from the program. They grasped that *leadership is ultimately about people and begins by working with all types of people*. This program helped them to *embrace diversity*, to *recognize different points of views*, and “*to be open to examining multiple perspectives as opposed to just listening to one side.*” They learned how to be *an educational leader who cares for, values, and honors all members of their school community*. Ironically, this finding of “*doing what’s right by all students*” is comparable to Starratt’s (1991) ethic of care, which “postulates a level of caring that honors the dignity of each person and desires to see that person enjoy a fully human life” (p. 195). We found that Starratt’s (1991) ethic of care was present in both the culture of the program (see Table Five, Lesson One) and in what these women had learned.

These findings support the existing research (see Capper & Young, 2014; Furman, 2012; Jean-Marie et al., 2009) that social justice work for educational administrators is not one-dimensional; rather, it involves a more complex thought process and a multilayered approach. By using Starratt’s (1991, 1996)



ethical framework to address social justice work, our findings indicate that one theme (i.e., the ethic of care) is not enough to address what is all involved in doing this type of work. As we propose, Starratt's (1991, 1996) multidimensional ethic (i.e., the ethic of critique, the ethic of justice, and the ethic of care) offers a complete and comprehensive approach for doing social justice work and in the building of an ethical school that educational administrators are entrusted with.

### Part Three: Findings From RQ2

Next, we investigate how the program prepared Agatha, Betty, and Cathy for their first administrative role.

#### *Feeling "Prepared" for Their Administrative Role*

In spite of challenges brought forth from the pandemic, participants felt "prepared." As indicated in Table 7, nine themes demonstrated how the program had prepared them for the assistant principalship.

**Table 7**

*Themes on of How the Program Prepared Participants for Their First Administrative Role*

Themes	Example Responses
<b>Getting Ready for the Job</b>	<i>"Passing the SLLA without a lot of studying. The professors did a good job of teaching the course and preparing us for the tests."</i>
	<i>"Interview skills to obtain the first job"</i>
<b>Transferring from a Teacher Leader to an Administrator</b>	<i>"Being professional at all times."</i>
	<i>"Presenting yourself in how you speak and talk to others"</i>
<b>Organizational Duties of an Administrator</b>	<i>"Knowing how to do budget"</i>
	<i>"Second day on the job I had incident with Title IX and OCR...learned how to do this from the X program"</i>
	<i>"Making sure we were in compliance...my first three weeks"</i>
	<i>"Building a master schedule and scheduling"</i>
	<i>"Writing observations"</i>
<b>Instructional Leader</b>	<i>"Shaped us into being instructional leaders, more so than your Jill Clark's of education"</i>
<b>Being Critical Thinkers and Problem Solvers</b>	<i>"Knowing how to research a problem, put together a plan or proposal, and present it"</i>

	<i>"Makes me more mindful when I say things, and when I make decisions, I always think about things that I have learned to get me where I am"</i>
	<i>"Forcing me out of my comfort zone made me think about other things"</i>
<b>Being a Caring and Compassionate Leader</b>	<i>"Doing what's right by all students"</i>
<b>Cultivating a Positive School Climate and Culture</b>	<i>Importance of cultivating a positive school culture and climate with all members of the school community</i>
	<i>Impact of effective communication in building trust</i>
<b>Developing Authentic Relationships</b>	<i>"Creating lasting relationships and lifelines with people when asking for help and/or guidance"</i>
<b>Embracing Diversity</b>	<i>"Recognizing different points of views"</i>
	<i>"Being open to examining multiple perspectives as opposed to just listening to one side"</i>

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*Note.* Themes are bolded in the first column. Example responses from participants are found in the second column grouped in accordance to each theme. Codes and categories are in italics, and participants' exact responses are in quotations.

### ***Program Did Not Focus on Social Justice Work or Prepare Participants to Do Social Justice Work***

As reflected in Table 7 and confirmed by findings from RQ1, the program *did not focus on social justice as a prevalent theme*. Participants *did not indicate that the program had prepared them to do the work of social justice*. In fact, participants wanted the program to address how to do social justice work in their present roles as Black female assistant principals (see Table 6). While participants felt more *"hesitation"* than *"resistance"* in doing social justice work, they wanted to know how best to *"navigate this work"* and how to have *"critical conversations with colleagues and higher-ups"* without feeling *"blackballed in the process."*

### ***Needing More Time to Learn the Assistant Principalship***

While this program provided Agatha, Betty, and Cathy with a *"strong foundation,"* they would like to remain in their roles for two to three more years before embarking on the principalship. They wanted more time *"doing the job in normal school year, and not during a pandemic."*

### **Other Suggestions for Program Builders**

Agatha, Betty, and Cathy discussed three areas for program builders to consider. First, they talked about the *importance of staying abreast on current topics*, such as learning more about *social-emotional learning* and *trauma informed care* in order to assist their students presently. Next, they suggested that future students should spend more time *doing internships in different school settings* so that upon exiting the program, students would know if they should apply for an administrative job in an urban, suburban, or rural setting. Finally, they described the importance of *learning how to effectively communicate to different groups of constituents*, particularly *practicing how to have both critical and courageous conversations in an effort “to do what’s right on behalf of all students” and “to change the status quo.”*

### **Limitations**

While this study provided us with great insight, sampling of subjects was a limitation. While five participants were originally selected to participate in our study, only three participated. The two members who did not participate may have responded differently than those of which data were collected. One of the participants also received a promotion and became a director in another division her second year. Responses from the second interview only helped to clarify and to verify findings from the first interview. We further employed a series of strategies to build validity and reliability in our study (see Rigor of the Study).

This study looked narrowly at how three Black women perceived social justice to be embedded in their program and how this program prepared them for their first administrative role. During the course of this study, no one could have predicted that these three women would have faced a pandemic in their first administrative role. It is possible that responses may have been different had COVID-19 not occurred. However, because the first author had formulated trusting relationships with participants, interview responses yielded rich, meaningful dialogue and insights that an outside researcher (unfamiliar with the program) would have been unable to capture. More importantly, insights from an underrepresented group brought forth powerful information for program builders to think about when enhancing their coursework on social justice and helping aspiring administrators prepare for the road ahead. According to Maxwell (1992), “the value of a qualitative study may depend on its lack of external generalizability in a statistical sense, it may provide an account of a setting or population that is illuminating” (p. 294).

### **Discussion and Implications**

In this study, we examined two research questions; evidence from our interviews suggested that while there was not a pervasive theme of social justice in the program (RQ1), these women felt “prepared” for their next job (RQ2). They had passed their SLLAs on their first attempt and had landed a job within one year of exiting out of the program. In spite of these successes, Agatha, Betty, and Cathy noted that this program still needed to “*go deeper*” in addressing how to do social justice work. Specifically, they asked for guidance for understanding how to do this work as Black female assistant principals working in a culture they perceived as being dominated by “White male leadership.”

In comparing these findings to Starratt’s (1991, 1996) framework, we found that while the ethic of caring was present in the culture of the program (see Table Five, Lesson One) and in what students had learned, the themes of critique and of justice were nonexistent. As articulated by participants, more knowledge was needed on the themes of critique and of justice to do social justice work in its entirety. Because social justice work is at the core of what educational administrators do (see Bogotch, 2002; Evans, 2007; Starratt, 2003a, 2003b, 2004, and 2005, Theoharis, 2007), we conclude that social justice cannot be

peripheral to any leadership program: It must be the nucleus of any program – mirrored in its culture, coursework, and student outcomes.

As a first step, educational administrator preparational programs must have clarity in what social justice means and looks like. Specifically, program builders need to have a common understanding of what their students need to know and to achieve in doing social justice work while in their programs and in future leadership roles. Without this common language, it is hard to teach aspiring administrators what social justice is, much less explore all of the intricate details involved with doing this work. Once this common vision has been established, program builders need to identify learning goals and a particular scope and sequence to address student outcomes. An extensive review of modules, assignments, readings, and assessments or projects will help determine which topics, modules, or assessments may need to be reorganized, realigned, and/or revised to ensure that the theme of social justice and Starratt's (1991, 1996) framework are deeply rooted in the program and central to what students need to know and to be able to do.

Heeding to our own advice, we recognize that within our own program further research is required, including a review of archival data (i.e., coursework, assignments, program evaluations, and student evaluations) to determine how best to intertwine social justice and social justice work into our slate of courses. The collective works of Brown, 2004; Capper et al., 2006; Furman, 2012; McKenzie et al., 2008; Jean-Marie et al., 2009; McKenzie et al., 2008 can provide program builders with a starting point of what comprehensive models for social justice leadership preparation look like. This, along with the extensive works of Starratt (1991, 1996, 1998, 2003a, 2003b, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2011, 2012; Sergiovanni et al., 2014), are all viable suggestions for restructuring what social justice and social justice work could look like in leadership programs. In this study, we adopted Starratt's (1991, 1996) ethical framework for addressing social justice work. However, as we begin to implement our own changes, it is possible that we may use components from other existing models to deepen our students' understanding of social justice work and to elaborate on Starratt's (1991, 1996) framework.

While the aforementioned suggestions are at the macro-level, findings from our study also illuminated key points at the micro-level. It is here that we offer a cautionary note. It should never be the responsibility of any student to be the instructor of another student's sense of critical awareness. That onus lies solely with preparational programs that should equip all students with the experiences and the capacity to uncover and to address the inequities and the injustices in schools (McKenzie et al., 2008). Social justice work is not about being divisive: The work itself involves getting people to recognize their own biases, to be more critically aware of injustices in schools and society, and to work together to bring about changes that are more equitable and suitable for all (McKenzie et al., 2008; Ryan, 2006).

In our study, we learned the importance of *“creating a sense of urgency”* in which aspiring administrators are *critically conscious of issues of race and racism in society and in their schools*, and *work collaboratively with all school members to eliminate these racial inequities and opportunity gaps for students of color*. To assist prospective leaders in developing a deeper sense of critical consciousness, students in preparational programs must grapple with *“the moral issues involved when schools disproportionately benefit some groups in society and fail others”* (Starratt, 1991, p. 1991). Depending on the course, Starratt's (1991, 1996) framework (as in the ethic of critique) can be used to analyze and to evaluate if structural and organizational arrangements, such as the allocation of resources, the process of hiring staff, the process of grading on a curve, *“the absence of important topics in textbooks, the lack of adequate due process for students, [or] the labeling criteria for naming some children gifted and others handicapped...impose a disproportionate advantage to some at the expense of others”* (Starratt, 1991, p. 190). Should this be the case, instructors would work with their students using the theme of justice to *reconstruct an alternative pathway that is fairer and more suitable for all student groups involved*. This assignment may include students researching other programs, revising protocols, and/or developing new

procedures and opportunities for a more just practice for all students and those involved. In having students articulate their steps and identify potential obstacles of their plans, students will gain a deeper understanding of the political, cultural, social, human relational, and structural constructs they will have to address when initiating, implementing, and sustaining this type of organizational change. Using the ethic of care, the students would respond to this leadership challenge in an inclusive and caring manner to bring about this new arrangement.

In response to restructuring a fairer and more suitable pathway for all student groups, we recognize that students must have a deep understanding of organizational change theories and leadership practices to plan out what it takes to initiate, implement, and sustain this type of change (Brooks et al., 2007; Ryan, 2006). As resonated in our findings, this would include instructors having conversations with their students about existing power dynamics and power differentials between majority and minority groups to help future leaders think through the resistance that they may encounter from specific groups when enacting social justice. Reflecting on this piece is vital to ensure that there is a more inclusive than divisive approach for bringing about this change.

As illuminated from our findings, conversations about the impact of a leader's race and gender in doing social justice work should be explored so that all aspiring administrators regardless of their gender and race feel prepared for enacting social justice. For example, Agatha, Betty, and Cathy anticipated they might face more resistance in doing social justice work than their White male counterparts because of their race and gender. To address this concern, Capper and Green (2013) discuss the importance of administrator preparation programs preparing all students for understanding organizational theories across epistemologies. According to them (2013), "when leaders experience resistance..., rather than viewing the resistance as personal either to the leader or from the individuals who resist" (p. 65), leaders can use their understanding of epistemological similarities and differences to help guide them in making a more proactive and inclusive response. Here, Theoharis (2007) reminds us that preparation programs should help students develop the leadership skills "to deal with, manage, and cope with resistance" (p. 251) in order to avoid burnout.

Finally, McKenzie et al. (2008) notes that it's "not enough to just 'tell' our university students about the strategies...we must provide opportunities for our students to participate in these activities" (p. 125). As suggested in our findings, our students must practice how to have courageous and critical conversations with teachers whom they will supervise, with colleagues of similar positions, and even with those who will be considered as their supervisors so that future administrators will have the skills sets to offer critical, constructive feedback in such a way that helps to promote social justice (see McKenzie et al., 2008). By understanding how to enter and lead these types of conversations on social justice based on who their audience is, students can initiate the work of social justice regardless if they become a dean of students, an assistant principal, or the principal of the building.

Lessons from our findings highlighted the necessity of social justice work being the cornerstone of educational administrator preparational programs. Through and in this dialogue, we began to see how social justice work could be framed at both the macro and micro levels. While this paper reveals more questions than it does answers, it nonetheless provides us with a roadmap of where to begin and a destination to arrive. Upon implementation, further research will need to be conducted to determine if students gained a complete understanding of both Starratt's (1991, 1996) framework and of doing social justice work.

## **Conclusion**

In a demographically changing and racially diverse population, it is incumbent upon program builders to create not only programs that prepare our students to be effective organizational managers,

instructional leaders, and critical thinkers but also to be ethical leaders who have the capacity, skills, and moral stance to enact social justice for the betterment of all. While passing the SLLA and successfully obtaining and retaining a job are important outcomes for any educational administration leadership program, it is by far only the beginning. By preparing our future leaders to be the guardians of social justice work, we are creating just schools in which all lives matter. In this larger ethical context, all identities are validated, respected, and included. All students have equitable access and opportunities for high-quality learning that is authentic, meaningful, and relevant in defining who they are and who they are to become. It is our hope that findings from this study will inspire program builders to take the time to review their own models and to reimagine new pathways for bringing social justice to the forefront of what they ask their aspiring leaders to reflect, critique, and enact on while in their programs and later in their roles as educational administrators. Social justice and what it demands are not just mere words on a piece of paper. It is both a process and a goal to achieve that requires a thoughtful, multistep approach. This arduous yet rewarding endeavor has the promise to impact and to change the lives of many, and for the better. Educational administration preparational programs by their very nature are in the unique position for making this call to action a reality for many aspiring leaders from one generation to a next. It's time to put forth that effort.

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# Improving a Rural Partnership-Based Leadership Preparation Program Using the DATA Model

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the International Council of Professors of Educational Leadership (ICPEL) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



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*The purpose of this paper is to introduce the DATA (Describe, Analyze, Theorize, Act) model for reflective practice to the field of educational leadership through an empirical illustration of how it was used to promote reflection and improvement in a leadership preparation program. Specifically, we report on the use of the DATA model to examine the health, strengths, and areas for growth of a research-practice partnership known as the Principal Preparation for Excellence and Equity in Rural Schools (PPEERS) program, a two-year, grant-supported program that includes a yearlong, fulltime internship. Launched in 2016, PPEERS is a partnership amongst 12 high-need districts and a large public university in the Southeastern United States. The DATA model was used to promote reflective practice amongst the PPEERS partners and to surface areas of strength and growth within the program and beyond. Three overarching categories of findings surfaced, with themes identified within each: 1) District needs and how they inform partnership practices; 2) value of PPEERS programming; and 3) mutuality of the partnership. We conclude with implications for engaging in reflective practice and improving leadership preparation.*

**Keywords:** principal preparation, leadership preparation, reflective practice, rural education, PPEERS, program evaluation, equity, partnerships, research-practice partnerships, RPPs.

The extant literature on school leadership preparation promotes the importance of cultivating reflective practice in aspiring leaders (e.g., Bengston et al., 2012; Boske, 2015; Carver & Kleine, 2016). Yet, little attention has been paid to the role of reflective practice by program leaders for ongoing program review and improvement. This paper seeks to address this gap by providing and illustrating a new framework for reflective practice within leadership preparation. The purpose of this paper is to introduce the DATA model (Peters, 1991; Smith et al., 2015) to the field of educational leadership and to illustrate how it can be used to promote reflection and improvement in a leadership preparation program. Specifically, in this paper we report on the use of the DATA model to examine the health, strengths, and areas for growth of a research-practice partnership known as the Principal Preparation for Excellence and Equity in Rural Schools (PPEERS) program. The DATA (Describe, Analyze, Theorize, Act) model was used to promote reflective practice amongst the PPEERS partners and to surface areas of strength and areas for growth within the program and beyond.

In this paper, we provide an overview of reflective practice in general and the DATA model specifically. We then describe the PPEERS program. Following that, we introduce the methodology, outlining the way in which the DATA model was used and articulating guiding questions for each element of the model. We also describe how the context of the COVID-19 pandemic impacted our reflective experience and use of the DATA model. Next, we detail our findings, which fell along three thematic categories: (a) district needs and how they inform partnership practices, (b) value of PPEERS programming, and (c) Mutuality of the partnership. We then discuss the findings and conclude with implications.

## **Literature Review**

In the sections that follow, we draw on extant literature in partnership work for leadership preparation, including research-practice partnerships (RPP) and design-based implementation research as a type of RPP. We then present literature on the use of reflective practice and introduce the DATA model as a structured framework for reflective practice.

### **Partnerships for Leadership Preparation**

In their seminal work, Orr and colleagues (2009) concluded that university–district partnerships may have the “greatest potential for broad-reaching, sustainable change in the quality of leadership preparation” (p. 5). Indeed, partnerships between universities and school districts are becoming more common and serve as communities of learning (Byrne-Jimenez et al., 2017) and drivers of innovation and excellence in leadership preparation (Orr & Barber, 2007; Wang et al., 2018). Further, “collaboration between universities and school districts is essential for internships to be situated in real, contextual situations that the aspiring administrators will face once seated as a school leader” (Reyes-Guerra & Barnett, 2017, p. 229). While partnerships come in various forms, one type is a research-practice partnership.

**Research-Practice Partnerships.** One type of partnership is a research-practice partnership (RPP). An RPP is a

long-term collaboration aimed at educational improvement or equitable transformation through engagement with research. These partnerships are intentionally organized to connect diverse forms of expertise and shift power relations in the research endeavor to ensure that all partners have a say in the joint work. (Farrell et al., 2021, p. iv)

The major contributions of RPPs include:

- 1) cultivating trusting, productive partnership relationships; 2) producing rigorous research; 3) producing knowledge that can inform educational improvement; 4) supporting the partnership in

achieving important educational goals; and 5) building the capacity of all partners to engage in partnership work to address persistent educational challenges, impacting all stakeholders. (He et al., 2020, p. 1)

Vetter et al. (2022) argue that all RPPs should center equity and social justice in partnership work, through explicitly using equity and justice frameworks; orienting the purpose of research around equity and justice; attending to shared understandings, definitions, and clarity of terminology; using equity-oriented research designs; and promoting equitable impacts for students, families, and educators (p. 27).

## Reflective Practice

Reflective practice is the process of intentionally reflecting on one's practice in order to refine, enhance, or further articulate our strategies and practices moving forward (e.g. Schon, 1983; Smith et al., 2015; Tovey & Skolits, 2022). Reflective practice requires the practitioner to question their own behaviors and actions, take space to listen to and/or consider different perspectives, theorize and deliberate on how to move forward in their practice, and take action based on their reflections, repeating the cycle for continued improvement or renegotiation of practice. Donald Schön (1983) brought reflective practice into the organizational and educational sphere through an explicit rejection of professionals as mere technicians. The reflective process is about making judgments based on contextual reflections on the situation at hand above and beyond the technical aspects of practice.

John Dewey (1910/1933) was another proponent of the reflection process. According to Rodgers (2002), Dewey's work can be distilled to four criteria. First, reflection is about the practitioner making connections between each experience that they encounter in practice and the ideas that are formed. Second, the reflection process is systematic and requires discipline; it has roots in the process of scientific inquiry. Third, reflection is relational and must happen in the context of the people and settings in which they find themselves in. Finally, the reflection process requires the practitioner to value both their own growth as well as the growth of others.

## The DATA Model

The DATA model (Peters, 1991, 2009; Tovey et al., 2015) is a systematic model for reflective practice that helps practitioners to understand what is happening, what is going well, what is not going well, and how to move forward and reason about the best possible course(s) of action. Specifically, the DATA model is about (D)escribing the situation that we are in within our practice; (A)nalyzing how that situation is happening, including assumptions, strengths, and weaknesses of the current efforts, and articulating a practical question, usually around how to move forward in practice; (T)heorizing around options and strategies for implementation; and (A)cting on the basis of the reflection process, specifically articulating steps that will be undertaken as a result of reflective practice. This model was first developed for adult learning by Peters (1991; 2009) and has been utilized in a number of action research projects. Subsequently, the model was brought into the program evaluation literature by Tovey and colleagues (2015) as a method for program evaluators to not only reflect on their own practice but also to systematically engage stakeholders in the reflective process.

The first step of the DATA model, *description*, is about providing a nuanced account of the events or actions that occurred, devoid of any attempt to explain the why of those occurrences. The second step, *analysis*, is then about articulating possible reasons why things occurred as they did, including the assumptions that led to the events/situation. This analysis process moves the reflective practitioner into asking a practical question such as, "How should I move forward," on the basis of their interrogation of the situation. During *theorizing*, practitioners are engaged in a sort of brainstorming process, looking at

alternative options for how to move forward and exploring both practice-oriented and literature-based reasoning for choosing each approach. The reflector is essentially developing a practical theory of how best to act in the situation (Peters, 1991; Tovey et al., 2015). Finally, the *act* stage is about articulating a plan of action on the basis of the reflective process. The intention of the model is iterative, and the whole DATA process can then occur again based on the actions taken, to understand further how to refine one's practice accordingly. This paper focuses on use of the DATA process by leaders of the PPEERS program to engage in program review and improvement. The PPEERS program is described in the following section.

### **Principal Preparation for Excellence and Equity in Rural Schools**

Rural districts struggle to recruit and retain effective principals, especially for high-needs schools (Pjanowski et al., 2009). Rural schools receive significantly fewer applications for principals (Pjanowski et al., 2009), and challenges rural districts face recruiting and retaining principals are expected to grow more acute in coming decades (Cruzeiro & Boon, 2009). As such, "growing your own" is the best solution for rural districts (Wood et al., 2013). The PPEERS program addresses this persistent problem of practice in North Carolina.

Launched in 2016, PPEERS is a mutualistic research-practice partnership of 12 rural districts and the University of North Carolina Greensboro (UNCG) that is focused on a persistent problem of practice in partner districts – a shallow and insufficient pool of educators to serve as effective school leaders, especially in high-needs schools. The partnership works to recruit, select, prepare, and place diverse administrators for high-needs rural schools. PPEERS is a two-year, grant-supported program that draws upon the *grow your own* model (Wood et al., 2013) to recruit high potential certified educators from partner districts (e.g., teachers, instructional coaches, etc.) into the leadership preparation program. The program, co-designed with district partners, includes a fulltime, yearlong internship and results in a Masters of School Administration (MSA) degree and principal licensure. The partnership began in 2016 and is currently serving its 4th cohort of aspiring school leaders. PPEERS was awarded the 2021 University Council of Educational Administration's Exemplary Educational Leadership Program Award.

### **Partnership**

One of the hallmarks of the PPEERS program is the rich, mutualistic partnership with districts. The idea for PPEERS first began germinating in early 2016 when faculty and several superintendents met over dinner to discuss the idea of partnering to build a principal pipeline for high-needs rural schools. That initial group invited more districts into the endeavor, outlined the basic concept of PPEERS, and -- after much design work by innumerable people -- launched the initiative. Today, more than six years later, PPEERS has a thriving partnership of 12 rural districts and UNCG.

Superintendents in PPEERS assign a District Point Person (DPP) to PPEERS - typically an assistant superintendent - to serve as a champion of the program, promote ongoing communication, continually strengthen the partnership, and engage in program co-design, implementation, review, and redesign. The DPPs and PPEERS program leaders meet monthly. At each meeting, there is a co-design segment that involves DPPs and program leaders collaborating to re/design some element of the program. Examples include designing the "switch/shadowing" experience during the internship, which exposes interns to a different style of leadership and another school culture; addressing cohort wellness, designing content and identifying resources on the topic of leading through crisis; developing simulations; etc. Since the inception of PPEERS in 2016, all our partner districts have been high-need administrative units, based on the fact that more than 50% of their schools are high-need schools (using North Carolina's definition thereof; Carruthers, et al., 2019), primarily because of Title I status.

The Office of Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Services (OAERS) at UNCG serves as the internal evaluator for PPEERS. Formal data collected by OAERS, as well as informal data collected in the program, are routinely used in monthly co-design sessions with DPPs to refine PPEERS programming. In fall of 2020, OAERS evaluators facilitated the DATA process with PPEERS DPPs in order to review and strengthen the PPEERS program. The next section outlines the methods used and the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Methodology

This paper is not focused on an empirical study but rather uses an empirical example to illustrate how the DATA model can be used to engage partners in reflective practice to strengthen leadership preparation programs. As such, this methodology section provides an overview – as opposed to detailed explication – of the methods used.

This study examined the health, strengths, and areas for growth of the PPEERS partnership. The overarching research question was: *With regard to the PPEERS partnership, what is going well, what could be improved, and what are next steps moving forward with this partnership in the future?* In September (Part 1) and October (Part 2) of 2020, two internal OAERS evaluators facilitated 45-minute focus groups of DPPs – senior leaders in partner districts who serve as the main liaisons to the program and are heavily involved in co-designing and refining the program.

For both Part 1 and Part 2 of the focus groups, DPPs were broken into two Zoom breakout rooms of about five people each. To promote open, candid dialogue, the PPEERS leadership team (comprised of program faculty and the program manager) did not participate in the focus groups. Graduate assistants took notes as focus group facilitators (internal evaluators from OAERS) used the DATA model to facilitate collaborative reflective practice. Prior to participation in the Zoom sessions, participants were provided with information about the nature and process of the DATA model. Table 1 provides sample questions for each element of the DATA model. Prior to engaging in DATA model questions, the facilitators used *grounding questions* to initiate dialogue, including: 1) What are some important values you uphold in your district's culture and practice? 2) What are you proud of as a district?

**Table 1**

*Sample Focus Group Questions from the DATA Model*

<p><b>(D)escribing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are your district's needs, and how do they overlap in your partnership with PPEERS?</li> <li>• How would you describe your partnership over the course of the past two years?</li> <li>• How do cultural dynamics operate in your partnership?</li> </ul>	<p><b>(A)nalyzing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the strengths of your partnership with PPEERS? Why those?</li> <li>• How would you analyze the collaboration efforts through a critical lens?</li> <li>• What assumptions, common beliefs, and micropolitical components factor into your partnership?</li> </ul>
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<p><b>(T)heorizing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can we continue to nurture collaboration?</li> <li>• What dynamics may need renegotiation or what shifts may be required?</li> <li>• How would different options for change impact the partnership?</li> </ul>	<p><b>(A)cting</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are next steps to implementing changes/strengthening the partnership?</li> <li>• How will we determine effective changes?</li> <li>• How can we each act on this reflection process?</li> </ul>
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Using this reflective process, DPPs participated in ways that allowed them to move beyond the questions themselves to consider ways the rural experience in their district might have broader challenges that needed to be addressed outside of simply reflecting on PPEERS itself. This led to conversations about the contexts in which PPEERS uniquely supports rural communities, but also administrative and educational system issues that, while beyond the control of PPEERS itself, provided information on opportunities to structure training for educational leaders that may work to deepen knowledge of these foundational issues within educational practices themselves.

Two members of this team (OAERS internal evaluators) examined the data from the focus groups using inductive thematic analysis, then categorized codes according to the aims of our research and in consideration of the DATA model guiding structure. While the questioning followed the pattern of asking through “description, analyzing, theorizing, and acting,” these codes permeated throughout responses, and led to several angles of viewing issues faced within rural educational leader training.

### **The Context of COVID-19**

Throughout reflections, focus group participants considered the challenges caused by COVID-19 for public education, as well as how their work in training new educational leaders was impacted by these shifts. Due to the unprecedented complications caused by the global pandemic, technological shifts to online learning as well as significant structural changes caused DPPs to reflect on how staff and communities were able to adapt to these needs. One DPP shared their district’s successes in handling the challenge:

I know that we're really proud of how we started the school year on plan B [each half of student body in school 2 days per week, with a day between for deep cleaning] and we had a couple little hiccups here and there but for the most part, it has been very successful. Especially after the first week when the teachers knew how serious it was to wear masks, and be six feet social distance, all that stuff.

This major pivot within the K-12 environment provided an urgent and important backdrop for the rest of our reflections.

### **Findings**

Three overarching categories of findings surfaced, with themes identified within each: (a) District needs and how they inform partnership practices, (b) value of PPEERS programming, and (c) mutuality of the partnership. Each of these is detailed in turn.

#### **District Needs and How They Inform Partnership Practices**

The reflection process began with DPPs describing the unique characteristics of their districts, and how their cultural dynamics contributed to their participation within the PPEERS partnership. As the focus

group participants discussed these traits, they noticed several overlaps in experience and where their unique characteristics fit into the larger collaborative partnership, specifically including components of equity and diversity as well as rurality. The subthemes of 1) equity and diversity; and 2) rurality are described in the following sections.

**Equity and diversity.** DPPs framed equity in terms of how access is provided for all individuals and groups within an educational setting, while diversity consists of individual and group characteristics that bring individual variety and different backgrounds that offer unique perspectives and cultural dynamics to communities. DPPs discussed how elements of diversity and culture fit into the values of their districts. While much of the discussion focused on racial/cultural diversity as opposed to specific cultural dynamics unique to their regions, much of those specifics were expressed through identification of situations that were more a part of rural life. DPPs also discussed how PPEERS approaches the differentiation between equity and equality. One participant noted that equity “doesn’t mean doing the same thing; it means meeting the children where they are.” Another DPP shared:

We have a very diverse community and school system. It is about a third Hispanic students -- our largest group -- but it's very close to [the number of] white students and African American students. We absolutely love that we have so many cultures represented in our community, and our faculty and staff is diverse as well. We absolutely love the cultural diversity within our school district.

When considering diversity within rural districts, DPPs brought forward information on the breakdown of demographics, highlighting the Hispanic communities, and while some regions reported similar groupings within administration, DPPs talked about how teachers and administrators may not have the same level of representative diversity. A DPP noted:

We have a good diversity in students, we have good diversity in leaders, but we lack some of that in the teaching field. And a lot of our teaching populations in schools don't match the student populations in schools, so that's one of our goals is to recruit and work toward making that match a little more. Not letting [diversity] just be on the student or leadership, [but having] students able to work with teachers who look like them or come from communities that they do.

During their reflective process, DPPs fed this into discussion of future goals for recruitment and hiring practices. The DPPs noted PPEERS as an excellent example of how to incorporate concentrated efforts to increase diversity within its recruiting and hiring practices. A DPP reflected:

The university asked the districts to consider ways to recruit people of color into [PPEERS] because of the need for diversity within school administration. I know that was something that in our district, we actively did that, and the university did a great job of providing examples.

**Rurality.** PPEERS is focused on rural school districts within North Carolina, and as such is interested in learning about rural traits and characteristics that provide unique challenges and opportunities for educational leaders. DPPs made note of differences within their rural communities as compared to more urban regions. Several of these comparisons concentrated on how community values were infused into rural relationships. A DPP shared that there is an ease in making personal connections: “Both our staff, our parents, our students -- we know who it is that we're working with, we know them on personal levels, and we watch them grow from kindergarten to high school.” Another DPP noted the connection between this rural focus and the responsiveness of the PPEERS program. They shared that PPEERS has “definitely designed courses and the program around that idea of flexibility and exposure to a lot of different topics.”

These dynamics led to hiring challenges in the districts. A DPP reflected, “Hiring a diverse teaching core obviously is very important for us, but... it's like finding a needle in the haystack, if you can find a person [at all].” DPPs continued the discussion, specifically focusing on the efforts of the districts to “grow



their own” administrators within the community. This fed directly into PPEERS operations. One DPP stated:

I know that the ones that we've hired who have come through PPEERS have all been in the community. They even came through school through elementary, middle and in high school. So, they're very invested into the company and the community.

DPPs further reflected this need for growing their own through the challenge of competition with other more urban districts. One noted:

We have a lot of competition with larger districts right around us that it's easy for teachers to just scoot over the lines and go there. Trying to find ways to build that capacity with our own and keep them here versus going and seeking other opportunities and other options elsewhere.

### **Value of PPEERS Programming**

Part of describing their collaboration and partnership with PPEERS resulted in DPPs reflecting on the value they have had for and continue to develop for the partnership. Reflections were focused on several components of PPEERS, including the rigor of the program, development of interrelationships, and communication, reflectiveness, and responsiveness, each of which is described in the following sections.

**Rigor in principal preparation.** Several DPPs reflected that PPEERS-trained leaders were ready for administrative positions immediately upon – or even before – graduation, and this in part stemmed from the preparation they received prior to entering into their administrative internship. One DPP noted:

I think the program really prepares individuals to be the principal, and not so much the assistant principal. And I think that's what's really good about [PPEERS] being out there. There are individuals that are lifelong APs, and they're happy in it. And that's fine. But you know, this work is very difficult and challenging... the program really does partner the candidate with the principal in the internship, and really does a good job of exposing the candidate to all aspects of leadership - not just managerial things that so often fall back to an assistant principal.

Another DPP shared, “I think the program is rigorous. I think it prepares them very well. It exposes them to a variety of different people and things while they're going through the program.” The DPPs discussed the PPEERS preparation philosophy and emphasis on various needs for principal training, noting specific strengths and methodologies that have been beneficial both for candidates and districts which benefit from prepared school administrators.

When directly describing the training involved in social justice and education, one participant directly noted:

I think PPEERS also has done a good job of instilling the foundations of social justice and equity inclusion. They've also done that with the mindset that these candidates are in rural districts and having that understanding and awareness of while you need to embrace diversity and inclusion, you have to also recognize the setting that you're working in, and everyone may not be quite as ready to understand that. So, it requires some patience sometimes. So, I think that's something that's been important as well – just really understanding your individual setting.

A participant also noted the importance of the cohort experience and connections between candidates:

By having this cohort model, I think there's a lot of support in that. There's a lot of opportunity for the candidates to discuss and share their experiences. They're going through these classes a year before the internship. They have one day a week where they can come together and work on their coursework, but also share and discuss the challenges they have experienced. That's really made for a quality program.

Some discussion focused on PPEERS leadership coaches and their roles within the process. Each PPEERS intern is connected to a leadership coach external to the district. The coach has no role in

evaluating the intern. Rather, the coach is focused entirely on supporting the individual growth of the intern. One DPP described coaches by saying:

I think also having coaches in the program to assist the candidates and being aware of the needs of all students, I think that's important. And I think there's been good diversity among the PPEERS coaches as well, that give good advice and assistance to these candidates.

One DPP described the program as more of an “apprenticeship” approach that allows candidates to be fully immersed in the district, whether that be within their professional development, coaching/mentoring, or obtaining a broader understanding of unique community needs.

**Development of relationships.** According to participants, network development is an integrated part of the PPEERS experience, and DPPs discussed both how they as DPPs communicate among each other and how PPEERS encourages ongoing communication between candidates. Regarding relationships among principal candidates, one DPP noted,

It has been part of the PPEERS program for candidates to continue to reach out to each other. I think it is important to have that network as new administrators, not just the veteran administrators which we try to partner them up with. They have their own network here in the district, but they also have their network of people in the region that are in a similar position or status to be able to get feedback and share strategies and experiences along the way.

During the focus groups, DPPs demonstrated mutual respect and sharing of information by asking each other questions about their experiences, requesting feedback, providing support, and reflecting on similarities and differences between rural districts together.

**Communication, reflectiveness, and responsiveness.** When discussing communication between PPEERS leaders at UNCG and districts, DPPs commented that their expectations were regularly exceeded, and a major part of the collaborative approach had to do with consistent, ongoing, and engaging communication over several different outlets. DPPs expressed appreciation of the PPEERS leadership team taking time to physically visit each district, maintaining monthly meetings of DPPs, providing flexibility within their responses, and adjusting programming based on emerging situations within districts.

One DPP noted, “if we have a question, all I have to do is email somebody in PPEERS, and it gets answered in 30 minutes, which sometimes doesn't happen with other groups.” Another participant stated:

Whenever there's a need it is always communicated. And the training, if we had an issue with something or there needed to be a focus area for one of the candidates or students, [the project director] has just been on it and been able to provide assistance.

It was not simply the abundance of communication that DPPs appreciated, as one participant expressed specifically being pleased with the multiple methods and styles of communication used by PPEERS: “I really appreciate the fact that they understand that people on this call typically have 500 other things going on and they definitely take that into consideration and communicate in a myriad of ways.”

In addition, DPPs shared direct appreciation for monthly meetings to maintain communication ties between districts and PPEERS. Specifically related to getting feedback from the DPPs and engaging in co-design, a participant reflected, “They've done just a great job of asking for feedback. It's a definite component of every meeting we have ever had. They're constantly asking us for feedback, and we're hearing ‘what can make your program better?’”

Similarly, another participant shared specifics about the reflective nature of program leadership, “They're always being reflective about the program... they're always wondering about ways to improve the program.” Another participant specifically spoke to this reflectiveness by saying PPEERS was constantly “developing awareness of where you are and what you need.”

Another DPP said “I just assumed that PPEERS is going to continue to tweak, because I think y'all want to do the best job you can do. And if you're reflecting and tweaking stuff, then you can improve. I just assume that that's what you're going to continue doing.”

### **Mutuality of the Partnership**

When categorizing the relationships developed between district partners and PPEERS leadership, DPPs discussed both their own roles as well as how those roles ideally connect with and complement PPEERS. They discussed 1) the relationship being a “two-way street,” 2) partnerships with PPEERS were layered along with other relationships with academic institutions, 3) the central connecting focus for rural districts that has been opened through PPEERS involvement, and 4) the methods in which PPEERS assists in addressing unique needs of rural districts within educational leadership. Each of these is detailed in the following paragraphs.

**Two-way street and pulling one's weight.** The DPPs described mutuality within the partnership as a “two-way street” with the presence of a constant dialogue between people who are supportive of each other through the process. They described PPEERS as a “very rigorous partner” focused on making sure everyone is on the same page. For DPPs, a major component of that effort was the communication between both parties. In particular, DPPs took space to reflect on the need for them to be more intentional in their role within that communication. For instance, a DPP shared:

We've had some people on our end that haven't necessarily attended [PPEERS meetings] when they should... and there for a while we fell off the map as far as our relationship and just trying to keep it there and keep us strong is very important to do our part, so that it's not just left up to PPEERS to always come to us but for us to always be in direct communication.

Another reflected the need for a two-way street of responsibility in thinking about sustainability of practices once the grant ends. They shared,

I think a big part of that falls back on the district shoulders. It's up to me to stay in contact with my candidate or candidates who have gone through in the past, in order to gain a better understanding of what their biggest takeaways from the program were, so that if the program is not necessarily there how can we build and offer some of those same supports to make sure that other people going back to get an admin degree that they walk away feeling that they've had those same experiences and those same supports along the way.

Mutuality was discussed as working to prevent any one person feeling that they were alone in their efforts, and the presence of a constant dialogue between people who are supportive of each other and the process.

DPPs pointed to monthly PPEERS-oriented DPP meetings with program leaders as a structure and mechanism for sharing experiences and developing a culture of mutuality. There was some sense, at least amongst a couple of DPPs, that their district needed to increase its contributions to mutuality, as one DPP described:

I honestly think that has been a very hard lesson for us to learn... I don't know that when we first started in the partnership as a district that we were all on the same page of taking on our responsibilities of what we were supposed to do... But we have learned that... the more that we are involved and the more that we take part in the process to pull our end of the deal and take some of the weight of that, it works a lot better.

**Layered Partnerships.** One DPP spoke to the multiple ways in which the district has partnered with the university:

A lot of our district and school-based administrators have ties to UNCG. There is just a natural partnership between [our county] and UNCG. And it has led to multiple grants and collaborations

that we have currently going on. . . There's so many partnerships that extend and somehow reach into PPEERS in our district and kind of flow in and out . . . It's because of how many people have had quality experiences with UNCG.

This perspective suggests that positive experiences with partnerships tend to breed and facilitate the development of other partnerships.

**Necessity of a centripetal force.** Further, while DPPs acknowledged the importance and value of the partnership, there was discussion that without PPEERS, the partnership would need a centering focus to continue:

I think a challenge is to contemplate continuing this particular group. The DPP group is typically organized more around a purpose. Right now, the purpose and the focus of this particular group would be the PPEERS program . . . To continue in some form or fashion, I think there would need to be a defined purpose or intent around what to do.

While the problem of practice (PoP) on which PPEERS is focused – addressing a too shallow pool of excellent leaders for rural schools – currently serves as the centripetal force of the partnership. For the partnership to continue to thrive beyond this PoP, it would need another centering focus, potentially another PoP to maintain momentum and commitment.

**Exceptional Children (EC) teacher pipeline as potential PoP.** While PPEERS is focused specifically on growing principal pipelines in high-needs rural districts, RPPs typically address multiple problems of practice. Within the focus groups, DPPs surfaced the PoP of a grossly insufficient labor pool of teachers for exceptional children (EC; students with disabilities). One DPP noted, “The big struggle for us is getting qualified EC teachers. We are struggling like crazy there, but it seems like at the last minute we had found what we needed. But it always seems we’re at the last minute. That's what happens every year. Then, we only hire the last person by the first day of school.” This was identified as an area ripe for developing a layered partnership focused on this much needed area and PoP.

## Discussion

The DATA model sessions with DPPs focused mostly on *describing, analyzing, and theorizing*. The last component of the DATA model is *(A)ction* on the basis of the reflection process. The DPPs and PPEERS program leaders identified future growth opportunities in recruitment efforts, leveling up the partnership through a layered program to address other district needs, and utilizing the strengths of the PPEERS programs as a model for their improvement.

For example, based on the clear need by districts for high-quality EC teachers, PPEERS leaders reached out to faculty from the Specialized Educational Services (SES) department, which is focused on serving EC populations. Through several meetings, the SES faculty, DPPs, and PPEERS leaders established a desire to partner to develop EC teachers through three strategies: 1) provide cohort-based graduate programming and certification in EC for current teachers in partner districts (e.g., person with an undergraduate elementary education degree and licensure would take an accelerated partnership-based graduate program to earn a graduate degree in EC education and licensure to serve as an EC teacher); 2) provide funding for undergraduates from partner districts to earn an undergraduate degree and licensure in special education; and 3) provide programming for high school students in partner districts to build interest in -- and get some exposure to -- serving EC students, with the goal of feeding high school graduates into a funded undergraduate degree in special education (as outlined in #2 above). The group determined that the aforementioned initiatives would require external funding, and the group is currently searching for funding opportunities and is in dialogue with the state Department of Public Instruction about possible options.

From the findings of our reflective practice together, we learned that we need to deepen programming on serving Latinx communities, given the increasing Latinx population in community and school demographics. Our leadership team met with Dr. Jonte' Hill, Principal of Person High School (Person County), in the spring of 2021 to review the data and determine changes to the course he teaches in the program, *ELC 616: Culturally Responsive Leadership*. Additionally, we have added an additional Internship Seminar day focused on serving Latinx students and their families (in addition to one already in the program) in order to expand and deepen intern learning on this topic. In these ways -- and others -- use of the DATA model has translated into specific action steps for improving our practice.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

The DATA model was used to guide district partners from the PPEERS program in reflective practice to review and improve the PPEERS program. Internal evaluators facilitated two Zoom-based sessions with partners to *describe, analyze, theorize, and act* in order to improve the PPEERS program. One generative and unexpected element that arose from reflective practice (Tovey et al., 2015; Schön, 1983) was action to explore possibilities of leveraging the current PPEERS partnership to form a layered partnership focused on cultivating an EC teacher pipeline and developing strategies that will utilize rural area assets as a point of strength to recruit candidates as early as high school to current educators in the field. To that end, the PPEERS leadership team has connected the partnership with members of the Specialized Educational Services department at UNCG to explore these possibilities and has provided space within the existing structure of DPP meetings to do so.

Another avenue of action is to further explore how districts take components of learning and networking from other contexts and partnerships into their work with PPEERS. For example, districts are still addressing COVID-19 related issues, student learning loss, and labor shortages. The regular DPP and PPEERS meetings or other similarly developed rigorous collaborations could provide a lever for deeper dialogue and collaboration to address a variety of district needs.

Third, based on the idea of reciprocal accountability (Marion et al., 2017), some districts plan to *step up their game* in terms of contributions toward a mutualistic partnership. This recognition arose organically by DPPs through reflective practice, demonstrating a powerful insight from within. The aforementioned self-initiated commitment to improving the partnership demonstrates an increased buy-in from the districts as well as a reflection of the PPEERS commitment to continuous improvement.

As demonstrated here, the DATA model (Tovey et al., 2015) is a way to take intentional space for reflection on our leadership practices. It is an efficient, effective, and rich method for surfacing deep understandings for leadership preparation programs and their partnerships. It provides critical information for stakeholders, a commitment to continuous improvement, and a model for school districts to use in their own district improvement initiatives.

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