Developing School Leaders' Instructional Leadership Practices Through Reflection

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Professional development (PD) for school leaders is focused primarily on documenting professional learning and identifying growth areas. However, the impact of reflections related to PD on sustaining school leaders' instructional capacity remains rather unaddressed. We examined how practicing school leaders develop their instructional leadership practices through the use of the Reflection Cycle included in PD. This study was anchored in the conceptual framework of the Reflection Cycle offered by Brown and Irby (2001). Reflection and transformation are two central components in this framework. To this end, we collected the data through school leader participants' reflections related to PD. The constant comparative method of the data analysis led to the emergence of three major themes as to how school leaders reflect on the improvement of building instructional capacity to improve teachers' pedagogy. Our findings revealed an increased awareness of instructional leadership and decision-making as informed by the practicing school leaders' reflections. Structured reflections via the use of the Reflection Cycle show promise for enhancing school leaders' plans for transforming and improving their instructional leadership practices.

Instructional leadership development requires reflection and action (Irby and Pugliese, 2019), and school leaders' busy, demanding schedules often make it difficult for them to regularly reflect upon their instructional leadership. Reflection has been one of the key competencies for effective school leaders as the workplace becomes increasingly complex (Roberts, 2008). Encouraging reflective practice on the part of school leaders, as Brown and Irby (2001) stated, fosters self-awareness of their limitations in addition to learning from past practices, events, and experiences. However, what constitutes reflective school leaders serving underserved schools is still a matter of debate and is relatively unexplored in the research literature. This study was anchored in the conceptual framework of the Reflection Cycle offered by Brown and Irby. Reflection and transformation are two central components in this framework. We examined how the practicing school leaders develop their instructional leadership practices through reflection.

As a result of the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) standards, according to Bengtson et al. (2020), school leaders have been challenged to think beyond traditional notions of instructional leadership. This suggests that school leaders must reconsider the use of data to include community, individual, and organizational aspects of their positions. For our study, we used the Texas Principal Standards as outlined in the Texas Administrative Code (Title 19, Part 2, Chapter 149, Subchapter BB, RULE §149.2001). The standard related to instructional leadership is as follows:

The principal is responsible for ensuring every student receives high-quality instruction.

(A) Knowledge and skills.

(i) Effective instructional leaders:

(I) prioritize instruction and student achievement by developing and sharing a clear definition of high-quality instruction based on best practices from research.

(II) implement a rigorous curriculum aligned with state standards;

(III) analyze the curriculum to ensure that teachers align content across grades and that curricular scopes and sequences meet the needs of their diverse student populations;

(IV) model instructional strategies and set expectations for the content, rigor, and structure of lessons and unit plans; and

(V) routinely monitor and improve instruction by visiting classrooms, giving formative feedback to teachers and attending grade or team meetings.

(ii) In schools led by effective instructional leaders, data are used to determine instructional decisions and monitor progress. Principals implement common interim assessment cycles to track classroom trends and determine appropriate interventions. Staff have the capacity to use data to drive effective instructional practices and interventions. The principal's focus on instruction

results in a school filled with effective teachers who can describe, plan, and implement strong instruction and classrooms filled with students actively engaged in cognitively challenging and differentiated activities. (Texas Administrative Code, 2014, p. 1).

Principals and assistant principals are assessed with the Texas Principal Evaluation and Support System (TPESS; Texas Education Agency, 2023) using the Texas Principal Standards. The TPESS incorporates the following instructional leadership competencies: (a) implement rigorous curricula and assessments aligned with state standards, including college and career readiness standards; (b) develop high-quality instructional practices among teachers that improve student performance; (c) monitor multiple forms of student data to inform instructional and intervention decisions, and maximize student achievement, and (d) ensure that effective instruction maximizes the growth of individual students, supports equity, and eliminates the achievement gap.

Review of Literature

In this section, we reviewed (a) reflection for school leaders and (b) reflection related to professional development for school leaders. The review of literature follows in that order.

Reflection for School Leaders

Dewey (1933), who promoted that the function of reflective practice is to transform a conflict situation into a coherent and settled one, first introduced the concept of reflection. Dewey's concepts related to reflection provided a foundation for current theories and were inclusive of a knowledge base for thinking. For Dewey (1933), critical reflection entails "(1) a state of doubt, hesitation, perplexity, mental difficulty in which thinking originates, and (2) an act of searching, hunting, inquiring to find materials that will resolve the doubt, to settle and dispose of the perplexity" (p. 12). Much of the work related to reflection into the 21st century followed Dewey's concepts.

The continual process of reflection, as Shamir and Eilam (2005) and later Jefferson et al. (2014) noted, is a key to improving one's leadership. For leaders to meet their work-related challenges, they need to enrich and deepen their understanding of current theory and practice, attend relevant professional meetings, and seek dialogue with colleagues while being reflective (Fisher & Waller, 2013; Gümüs, 2019). Without the predisposition to reflect on their practice, school leaders are less likely to improve their performance and transform schools.

In the 1990s, Brown and Irby (1995) and Short (1997) examined how reflection contributed to the improvement and growth of school leaders as professionals. They noted that reflection improves leadership skills by assisting school leaders in: (a) solving problems, (b) monitoring progress, (c) accelerating leading change, and (d) enhancing organizational success and student achievement. When leaders take time to reflect on meaningful topics, as suggested by and Aviles (2021), they often come to view reflection as a key factor in school improvement.

Previously, researchers (i.e., Drake et al., 2023; Genao, 2016; Glanz & Heimann, 2019; Jefferson & Anderson, 2017; Patterson, 2015) revealed that reflection is a highly valued attribute for effective leadership teams. Branson (2007) described reflection, used by Queensland primary

school principals, as an effective tool for providing principals with the necessary self-knowledge of their values to enhance their authentic leadership practice. Patterson (2015) and Smith and Shaw (2011) had empirically examined how reflection contributes to leadership capacity but did not describe how this could be made mainstream. Also, Moller (2023) revealed a more nuanced understanding of collective participation using reflection practice, collective dialogue, and along with developing agency for school leaders. Given the demands under which school leaders work, it is critical for administrators to discover "their own readiness" for change by becoming reflective (Zimmerman, 2011, p. 107). Wu and Crocco (2019) examined reflection for leadership development, revealing that the measurement for reflection remains rather unaddressed in the literature. Reviewing the application of reflection, they suggested that the outcomes of reflective practices vary, ranging from personal development to team efficiency. Thus, reflection has been found to be valuable in helping school leaders understand, evaluate, and, if necessary, adapt their leadership strategies. Furthermore, Blase and Blase (2002) have identified reflection and growth as two major themes needed to define an effective instructional leader. Principals who were effective instructional leaders from the perspective of teachers tended to use a wide range of strategies, including inquiry, reflection, exploration, and experimentation. They found that effective principals talked with teachers to promote reflection and professional growth.

Reflection Related to Professional Development for School Leaders

Professional development (PD) for school leaders is focused primarily on documenting professional learning and identifying growth areas. However, the impact of reflections related to PD on sustaining school leaders' instructional capacity remains rather unexamined. Thus, practicing school leaders need to reflect on the nature of their professional leading and learning through development of artifacts. Zur and Eisikovits (2016) indicated that successful school leaders constantly use the reflection process through the development of artifacts to improve their leadership and enhance collaboration. Specifically, they found that reflection through the process of portfolio development promoted the following among superintendents, principals, and teachers: (a) collaboration and communication, (b) trust-building in a non-threatening environment, (c) leadership growth, and (d) problem solving skills (Zur & Eisikovits, 2016).

At the turn of the century, principal PD captured in portfolios were common tools for assessing what practicing principals had learned and how their learning could improve future actions (Brown & Irby, 2001). Foundationally, Brown and Irby suggested that PD for school leaders should meet the following assumptions:

1. The principals' practice greatly influences school outcomes.
2. Leadership expectations are understood by everyone.
3. Active reflection is necessary to set goals and learn from past experiences.
4. Professional development (PD), mentoring, and coaching are key to the appraisal process. (p. 19)

According to Brown and Irby (2001), reflection captured in portfolios involves: (a) the selection of an artifact; (b) sharing leadership experiences with the artifact, and (c) an action plan. Principal portfolios, which represent participants' growth as evidenced by a collection of artifacts, not only encourage reflection but also improve professional learning and growth (Brown & Irby).

Thus, reflection became an integral part of the portfolios related to PD for principals, for it motivated school leaders to seek new understanding of and solutions to arising issues.
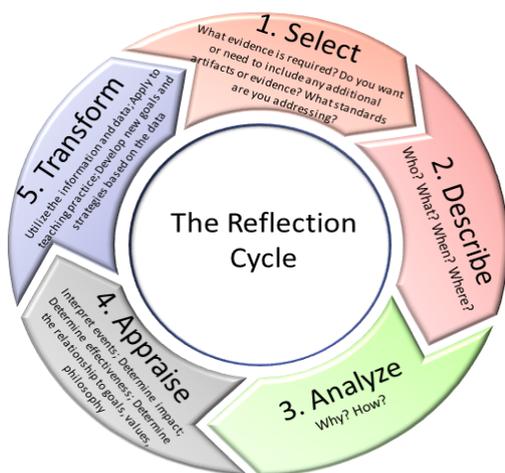
In studies employing reflection related to PD, researchers (e.g., Chikoko et al., 2011; Knoeppel & Logan, 2011) found that the reflection process has resulted in improved leadership practice in such areas as problem-solving, resource management, and most importantly, student progress. Slepcevic-Zach and Stock (2018) confirmed a significant and positive impact of reflection related to PD, helping principals to improve their self-regulation, engagement, and awareness. Reflection related to PD requires more systematic higher-order thinking about events and experiences leading to deep-level analysis (Nesbit, 2012). Using a transformative learning theory, Klar et al. (2020) revealed that the consideration of the practicing school leaders' problem through reflection allowed them to increase their leadership capabilities and act more systematically through participating in a leadership learning community.

Conceptual Framework: The Reflection Cycle

Previously, researchers (e.g., Hallinger, 2003; Nir & Hameiri, 2014; Printy, 2010) suggested that school leaders play a central role in implementing instructional practices such as supervision of instruction, communication with teachers, resource allocation, and budgeting. We built our conceptual framework on the Reflection Cycle (Brown & Irby, 2001). Though reflective practice has been brought forward by Schön (1987), this Reflection Cycle (Brown & Irby) was groundbreaking as the first reflective framework specifically developed for principals and other school leaders to improve their leadership practices.

Inspired by the idea of a personal and professional reflection that is placed within a PD for school leaders (Brown & Irby, 2001), we aimed to determine how well the practicing school leaders developed their instructional leadership practices through the Reflection Cycle in PD. To gather these perspectives, the Reflection Cycle (Brown & Irby) was embedded at the end of each module of online PD content to facilitate school leaders' reflections. Participants moved through five stages as depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1
The Reflection Cycle (Brown & Irby, 2001; Used with permission)

The Reflection Cycle served as a guide for continuous and reflective learning and transformative thinking about practice. Brown and Irby (2001) offered five steps for developing reflective activities, including: (a) select the artifact; (b) describe the circumstances related to the artifact; (c) analyze the *why* of the selection of the artifact and *how* of its relationship to the activities; (d) appraise the artifact and evaluate how it relates to knowledge; and (e) transform the existing practice by translating theory to practice and developing plans for future practice (see Figure 1).

Reflective practice (Schön, 1987), participatory action research (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019), and experiential learning (Dewey, 1933) explained how individuals learn through experience. This framework helped us understand different cycles of reflection in the development of individual reflections. This helped us better understand the Reflection Cycle as a structure embedded in the PD.

Purpose of the Study and Research Question

The purpose of this study was to examine how the practicing school leaders develop their instructional leadership practices through the use of the Reflection Cycle included in PD. We sought to answer this research question: In what ways did school leaders develop their instructional leadership practices through the use of the Reflection Cycle included in PD?

Method

Research Context and Approach

This study was derived from the project Accelerated Preparation of Leaders for Underserved Schools (A-PLUS, Grant Award No. U423A170053; Irby et al., 2017) grant under the U.S. Department of Education SEED Program, which focused on school leaders working in high-needs schools across the state of Texas. The project incorporated multiple innovative approaches to developing school leaders in building instructional capacity at the campus level.

In our study, we examined school leaders in Texas who serve many English learners (defined in government documents as students who speak a language other than English as their home language; however, we will use the term, "emergent bilinguals," in this paper). In Texas Education Code (TEC) 29.08, at-risk students are defined as those at risk of dropping out of school, which includes EB students. In general, high-needs schools or schools with high-needs students serve EBs and any student group within TEC 29.08.

In the larger grant, we worked with the leadership teams, including principals, assistant principals, and instructional skill specialists, from 18 school districts across the state of Texas. Following the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2017-2018), our districts fell into four basic types: City (n = 6, 32%), Suburban (n = 7, 38%), Town (n = 2, 12%), and Rural (n = 3, 18%), including charter schools. With the four basic types outlined by the NCES, we assigned charter school districts to the relevant major category.

For this study, we used a phenomenological approach (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2016), which captures lived experiences through relevant and extensive written reflections to determine experiences with a particular phenomenon under investigation. A

phenomenological approach was adopted for this study as it enabled the exploration of the participants' reflections related to PD. We investigated the responses of each participant related to the research question and then looked across all responses for similarities and differences.

Participants

The participants of this study included 40 school leaders at the elementary school level in the state of Texas. The participants were from campuses with traditionally underrepresented students, including emergent bilingual students. Table 1 presents the demographic information of participating school leaders in the present research. Out of 44 principals, a total of 40 participated in the VMC Questionnaire. As displayed in Table 1, 12.5% of the participants (n = 5) were younger than 35; 32.5% (n = 13) of the participants were 35-44 years old; 42.5% (n = 17) were 45-54 years old, and 12.5% of the participants (n = 5) were older than 55. Approximately, forty-eight percent (n = 19) of the participants were White, followed by Hispanic (22.5%, n = 9), Black/African American (20%, n = 8), Asian (7.5%, n = 3) and others (3%, n = 1). Concerning their experience of being an administrator, 15% of participants (n = 6) had below one year of experience, 15% of them have worked as an administrator for 1-2 years (n = 6). As displayed in Table 1, 27.5% of participants (n = 11) reported that they have worked as an administrator for 3-5 years, 25% of them (n = 10) claimed their administrator experience as 6-10 years, and 17.5% of them had above 11 years (n = 7) of experience as an administrator. Detailed information of the participants demographic variables is given in Table 1.

Table 1
School Leaders' Demographic Information

Variables	Categories	N	Percentage (%)
Age	25-34	5	12.5%
	35-44	13	32.5%
	45-54	17	42.5%
	55+	5	12.5%
Ethnicity	White	19	47.5%
	Black or African American	8	20.0%
	Asian	3	7.5%
	Hispanic	9	22.5%
	Other	1	2.5%

Administrator Experience	< 1 year	6	15.0%
	1-2 years	6	15.0%
	3-5 years	11	27.5%
	6-10 years	10	25.0%
	11+ years	7	17.5%

Instrument

To document the school leaders' reflections, we used the Reflection Cycle as an instrument to collect and analyze the data. We allowed for individuality regarding participants' written reflections in course modules related to PD. Although we did not specify the length, the participants' reflections were consistent, with an average length of one page. Each participant was required to use module (topic) as an artifact and write their reflections addressing PD using the Reflection Cycle. The practicing school leaders applied the five steps of the Reflection Cycle to write their experiences while using insights gained from the PD. The data from the written reflections (See Figure 2) in the Reflection Cycle were analyzed via an inductive data driven qualitative analysis.

Figure 2
Written Reflection Questions Prompt

Reflection

To upload your artifact, click on the "Reply" button below. Next, select the paper clip icon next to the word "Attach." Then, click on the "Choose File" button. Before posting, type your response to the Reflection Cycle questions below. After uploading your artifact and responding to the reflection questions, you will see and can respond to others' artifacts and reflections.

Select: Please *upload* one artifact that you currently implement as a leader that represents your experience with the content of this module. You could upload a photo of the artifact, a meeting agenda, notes, an observation, a program poster, a new report card, a Campus Improvement Plan cover, and more.

Describe: How would you describe your experience in leading around this artifact?

Analyze: How does your experience affect goals or expectations for yourself or for others on your campus or community? How does your experience impact implementation of the concepts learned or reviewed?

Appraise: How do you know if this experience (related to the artifact you uploaded) is effective or of value? In what ways and with what data are you able to appraise the effectiveness of your leadership around this experience? What tool, resource, or instrument is used to measure effectiveness?

Transform: Based on the experiences and your reflection on them surrounding this module topic (related to the artifact you uploaded), how will you alter your leadership behavior and/or actions in implementing the concept of this module? Did this module alter or add to your understanding of building instructional capacity? If so, in what way?

Intervention and Data Collection Procedure

The participants used the online platform, Canvas, to improve implementation of instructional strategies for school leaders via online, *work at your own pace* modules. PD certificates for online courses are provided as continuing PD (CPE) for participants' professional evaluation and improvement. In PD modules, there is a reflection that is based on the Brown and Irby's (2001) Reflection Cycle, which should lead to pedagogical transformation.

The participants took part in scheduled four PD course modules on a weekly basis. The PD modules included the L.E.A.D.E.R. model which included Leading Questions, Engagement (an engaging video, story, visual), Applied Research, Discussion related to research, Example(s) of applications of the topic, and Reflection (using the Reflection Cycle). As noted previously, the L.E.A.D.E.R. model in PD is applied to all course modules. Those are as follows:

1. The *Leading Question* helped the participating school leaders focus on the topic with a deep, probing question.
2. The *Engagement* gave the participants an example or a visual representation of the topic.
3. The *Applied Research* provided research-based evidence that supported the topic. Without the applied research in a VPLC, the discussion is not enriched.
4. The *Discussion* section consisted of thoughtful, insightful questions that built on the leading question(s) and research section of the VPLC.
5. The *Example* section gave participants a concrete example they could take away to improve their instructional leadership practice.
6. The final step in the VPLC was *Reflection with the ultimate action being Transformation*.

For these four PD modules, the focus was on building instructional leadership capacity to influence the teaching of emergent bilingual students. These course modules included instructional leadership-related topics such as: (a) leading and learning in professional learning communities (PLC), (b) monitoring curriculum, (c) improving instruction, and (d) using data to make instructional decisions. Each module took between 45-60 minutes to complete.

Data Analysis

For data analysis, we reviewed and coded verbatim written quotations from participants' responses and reflections via the Strauss and Corbin (1990) constant comparative method. We first worked through open coding, then axial coding, and finally selective coding within predetermined codes noted as attribute codes by Miles et al. (2014). The predetermined codes were aligned to the four course modules that participants took part in.

The recurring themes were selected through comparison within and between each individual participant's responses. The researchers continued to explore the emerging themes until they observed no change in the data. We triangulated the data by reviewing it independently and then coming together to arrive at a consensus about the themes. The data were triangulated to identify points of convergence and divergence (Creswell & Clark, 2017) via each investigator. To increase the rigor of the video analysis and document the rationale behind emerging categories, the entire research team determined to conduct another round of review.

They again independently coded the selected participants' response, and then they shared their coding schemes for cross-comparisons among the coders.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

For establishing trustworthiness and credibility, we adopted three strategies: (a) low inference descriptors, (b) member checking, and (c) investigator triangulation (Johnson, 1997). We used low inference descriptors to collect verbatims (i.e., direct quotations) from participants' reflections. Member checking was accomplished by having the participants validate that the information was consistent with their responses. A summary of the findings was shared with the participants to review. We adopted investigator triangulation (i.e., four researchers) in collecting and interpreting the data to enrich trustworthiness through individual coding, and we coded the reflections independently. After completing the coding independently, two of the researchers reviewed the emerging themes until they reached an agreement, and two others of the researchers reviewed and clarified the themes along with low inference descriptors.

Findings

We addressed in what ways the practicing school leaders develop their instructional leadership practices using the Reflection Cycle in PD. The participants shared their leadership experiences related to PD. They used the Reflection Cycle to discuss their own thoughts and areas of improvement. Three major themes were found that exemplify how the school leaders develop their instructional leadership practices via a structured reflection process for each. Table 2 depicts the three themes and thematic descriptors underlying participants' reflections.

Table 2
School Leaders' Development of Their Instructional Leadership Practices Using the Reflection Cycle

Themes	Sub-themes	Thematic descriptors

Learning in PLC	Opportunities to reflect on leadership practices	Collaborative partnership Communication with leadership teams Experiences of peers
Monitoring instructional leadership	Curriculum management practices	Implementation of the curriculum Assessing teaching practices Probe the cause of instructional challenges
Transforming instructional leadership	Direction to refine instruction for teachers of EBs	Instructional capacity building for teachers Modeling reflective practices for teachers Goal setting Applying the gained knowledge/skills
	Transformative instructional leadership practices for helping teachers	

The excerpts below were taken from the practicing school leaders' reflections.

Theme 1: Learning in Professional Learning Communities

Opportunities to Reflect on Leadership Practices

Under this theme, the practicing school leaders indicated that the discussion and reflection inspired them to reflect on their instructional leadership practices. The participants indicated a positive impact of leading and learning in a PLC (a module topic) for leaders regarding awareness, reflection, and transformation of their practices. The participants' responses related to their future practices as to how they would tailor their instructional leadership practices to teachers of EBs. A school leader stated:

> *This [PD- Leading and Learning in PLCs] module added to my understanding of building instructional capacity through making a clearer designation between general PD and PLC learning experiences. I will try my best to make sure that the things we cover are truly matching the needs of those we serve during the learning sessions.*

Echoing the same ideas, another participant added:

> *This experience affects goals for the leaders in that they are expected to share their learning from PD with others. This experience impacts their process of implementation in that it allows them to share and practice their learning in PD.*

Additional importance to professional learning was the encouragement of the incorporation of new knowledge bases. The practicing school leaders believed that participation in the PD was valuable, and they reported certain practices they learned were not practices on their current campus. The school leaders' goals were to reflect and transfer what they learned to improve teachers' instruction on their campus. A school leader reflected:

> *This module was very useful to convince our district leadership team to focus more on professional learning rather than PD. I would like to continue using the VPLC L.E.A.D.E.R. model that we started implementing this year that was uploaded in the module. Our district has schools in three different cities, and it is not cost effective to get together regularly. Therefore, we started using the VPLC model similar to this program that we are in. We noticed that our teachers have great practices that they are sharing with each other.*

Similarly, a school leader noted:

> *I know in my district we have a lot of professional development and not as many professional learning opportunities. We have spent a lot of time teaching the masses on things that the district administration thinks the teachers need to know if they sit and get sessions. These are not all bad, however, there is little connection between those training sessions and the impact on student learning. This was better than what we have received previously.*

The participants indicated that the most important takeaway from the PD on Leading and Learning on PLC is to reflect how school leaders can use the course module to help them improve their teachers' instructional practices for EBs. They indicated they learned differences between general PD and PLCs.

Theme 2: Monitoring Instructional Leadership

Curriculum Management Practices

To build instructional leadership capacity, we worked with the school leaders, via two PD modules (Improving Instruction and Monitoring Curriculum and Instruction), to monitor their practices and help them determine what avenues might help them improve instruction for teachers of EBs while reflecting on their own practice. A school leader commented:

> *I monitor the lesson plan, and I use benchmarks to see if student progress was made. We are making great progress and teachers are taking ownership of teaching.*

The practicing school leaders worked together on issues related to teaching and learning to improve curriculum and instruction on their campuses. Through individual and shared reflections, participants referred to some common instructional practices that teachers used in their classrooms. These included but were not limited to: (a) guided lesson plan, (b) common assessment analysis, and (c) 5E model (i.e., Engage, Explore, Explain, Elaborate, and Evaluate) along with explicit instruction. While some of the participants were familiar with these concepts, re-reading the research (in the *A*pplied Research step in the L.E.*A*.D.E.R. format) gave them time to reflect and remember how to implement these practices. A principal shared context for a lesson plan format for teaching EBs:

Before I arrived, a lesson plan format did not exist. Everyone did their own thing which is fine in some schools. But at my school because we have 100% EBs, we needed a structure that was similar in instruction in each class. Our ultimate goals were to be student-centered and to increase language development.

Shared reflective practices reminded the participants what to include in their lesson plans. They shared in the written reflections that they used the lesson plan at the beginning of the school academic year to guide teachers and their leadership teams when planning and monitoring. The participants came to the agreement on how to monitor and evaluate effective instructional practices as they engaged in the two related PD modules. Two school leaders reflected as follows:

With assessment, we can see where the students are. We can also see their growth and what areas they need improvement on. Through monitoring, we can help teachers focus on improving their instructional delivery.

Self and regular evaluation of the implemented program is a must to see the outcomes and take necessary actions towards the ultimate goals. We have to fix the weak areas and continue emphasizing the strength areas by appreciating the individuals and teams involved in the monitoring process.

The school leaders shared best practices in every module with each other while reflecting on analyzing and monitoring effective instructional strategies employed by the school as well as areas wherein teachers of EBs could improve their instruction. One of the participants reflected as follows:

This module helped to pinpoint how I can identify which teachers need more help and support in analyzing data and monitoring the effectiveness of their own instruction. It helped me to transform my practice by asking more probing questions to ensure teachers are capable of accurately analyzing their curriculum and instruction.

Similarly, another school leader commented:

I will go through explicit instruction strategies with my team and teachers to be able to cover EB students' needs. Administrative team supervising all teachers' performance and goals for each test to see improvement. Each teacher knows their students' scores and their needs. So, they have different strategies for EBs. If we are not going to monitor student performance closely, we cannot address their needs and we cannot find the correct solution.

Based on participants' written reflections, the school leaders tended to better ensure their instructional leadership practices to monitor curriculum and instruction implementation. Specifically, they seemed to learn that by asking probing questions of their teachers and engaging them in effective data analysis, the teachers and their teams could improve not only instruction, but also the curriculum for EBs. Also present in most of the participants' reflections, the participants were encouraged in the development of school-wide lesson plan formats that were geared toward enhancing student learning.

Theme 3: Transforming Instructional Leadership

Direction to Refine Instruction for Teachers of EBs

Based on the data, the participants wrote their reflections related to their PD module (Improving Instruction) learning and reflected on effective instruction employed by teachers. A school leader reflected that they assisted teachers of EBs, they were able to engage the teachers in discussions as follows:

> *One thing that I found effective when sharing the PD learning about inclusion and implementation of the English language proficiency standards in all subject areas, was that all teachers began to share their experiences with EBs and the different ways they would benefit if they were able to make better connections with the content.*

The participant went on further and added:

> *Based on the experiences and my reflection on them surrounding this module I will try to better ensure teacher knowledge and implementation on the elements. This added to my understanding of building instructional capacity in that it confirmed my current knowledge and reminded me of some key points.*

With a focus on building instructional capacity, the participants regarded the discussion and reflection activities within the PD as a tool that provided opportunities to reflect and support for improved instruction for teachers of EBs. Along the same lines, another participant reflected on the benefits of the reflection in PD as a tool to refine their instructional leadership and transform their practices. She commented as follows:

> *Using this module in planning helps us move toward better instructional planning and deliver the instruction to the student to make it impactful.*

Another participant reflected as follows:

> *Writing reflections added to my understanding of building instructional capacity through making a clearer designation between PD and learning experiences. I will try my best to make sure that the things we cover are truly matching the needs of those we serve during the learning sessions.*

With a focus on building instructional leadership capacity, PD modules using reflection activities provided opportunities for school leaders to develop their instructional leadership practices and consider effective strategies for teachers of EBs.

Transformative Instructional Leadership Practices for Helping Teachers

Reflections included in the PD module (Using Data to Make Instructional Decision) established a positive, personal, and individualized approach to influence and transform school leaders' practices. Without transformation of practice based on the new learning, there is little to no improved practice. Through reflection, aspiring school principals were able to better understand their own learning and leading objectives and seek additional experience while being engaged in PD to set their leadership goals. The participants' reflections evidenced more attention to involving the leadership team in solutions and in planning for the future. Planning for implementation revealed the importance of what actions to take and what evidence to use to determine the success of future actions. A principal, for example, asserted as follows:

> *I will continue empowering teachers to design their teaching based on data around the success of students and transforming the way instruction is implemented.*

Another principal noted:

Teachers feel empowered and have a sense of ownership, because they are responsible for identifying essential content to cover in a unit and develop the unit tests to assess it. The teachers have the support of deans and principal in their assessments.

A school leader commented further:

The student data presented in this module leads to teacher reflection and action plans for EBs. This may lead to needing additional language support, and language the teacher uses.

Another participant went on further and added:

After going through this module, I feel like we are on the right track when looking at student data. It is important to start with the end in mind and plan with a backwards design. Allow the student data to help inform instruction if it is reliable and valid. This was to help teachers to focus on what they want students to learn, how will we know if they learned it, and what will we do if they mastered it or need help.

The participants felt the Reflection Cycle within PD was a structured process which allowed the practicing school leaders to consider altering their practices around data usage and to develop and leverage their skills related to data-based instructional decisions as they help teachers to advance their awareness of EB's needs.

A school leader reflected as follows:

I absolutely enjoy completing the reflection after each module because I can really note what I have retained and how I could either enhance the current practices or introduce the new knowledge to colleagues and teachers. As the last module noted, data is vital to student success, and it is vital that we use it.

Another school leader noted a transformation based on their learning:

This will change my approach to be more intentional and purposeful in the implementation and evaluation of the data process on my campus. Ensuring that it is done with fidelity with periodic follow ups that will evaluate the need for adjustments.

Overall, evidence indicated that school leaders were able to transform their thoughts related to their actions using the Reflection Cycle within PD. The discussion and reflection activities enabled the participants to review not only their goals, but also what they believed related to the provision of support for their teachers' instructional capacities.

Discussion

In this study, we examined how the practicing school leaders develop their instructional leadership practices using the Reflection Cycle included in PD. We found three major themes related to the PD course modules which reflected the ways school leaders developed their instructional practices by (a) learning in PLC, (b) monitoring their practices, and (c) transforming their instructional leadership. We found that the Reflection Cycle was an effective tool which provided a structured process to inspire the school leaders to reflect on their own leadership practice. This allowed the school leaders to reflect on what they have learned related to PD and how they have used it to transform themselves and their campuses. We found that instructional modules and activities used in PD modules were applicable to various school settings and provided meaningful practices for school leaders.

The Reflection Cycle as a capacity-building tool was also deemed an an impactful tool that provided encouragement, reflection, and support to inspire the school leaders to reflect on their own leadership practice. As Lehrer (2013) and Bleach (2014) noted, the practicing school leaders became able to recognize their own leadership strengths and areas to grow through critical reflections and professional dialogues. We also found that school leaders are able to reflect on their actions, and based on their involvement in PD, they are inspired to engage in transformative leadership actions. In line with previous studies (Aas & Blom, 2018; Lumpkin, 2016; Margolis & Huggins, 2012), school leaders modeled reflection and inquiry while working with other leaders to foster empowerment and ownership of their own practices. In another study, Colmer (2017) indicated that the school leaders were empowered to lead and offer more support to their teachers of EBs through collaborative agency.

The use of reflections for improving the participants' leadership capacity in leading instruction, as evidenced earlier (Day et al., 2016; Hallinger, 2003) offers a new avenue for leadership development. For continuous professional learning, reflective practice was beneficial to school leaders with opportunities to reflect and identify strategies to constantly improve their practices (Martinez, 2015; Patterson, 2015). According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2009), instructional leadership practices are strengthened when practicing school leaders reflect, question routines, and support each other's professional learning. Using information reflected during the PD sessions impacted the participants' instructional practices which led to restructuring their thoughts around instructional leadership practices. In this study, we found that structured reflections using the Reflection Cycle in PD provided insights and support for inspired and transformative leadership actions.

Implications and Suggestions

This study took place during the closings of many schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, a time when most leaders were struggling virtually to lead and learn in instruction. However, in this study, participants continued their learning and made their online platform a way to connect and increase essential knowledge. The PD modules included an overarching focus on (a) making reflection a priority and (b) inspiring school leaders to reflect on their own leadership practices. Significantly, the Reflection Cycle assisted the school leaders to consider transforming their future actions in the areas of leading instruction.

Key findings, highlighted in the current research, offer practical guidance for school leaders to refine their instructional leadership practices. The use of the Reflection Cycle with the PD modules, along with discussions helped school leaders during a time of isolation (with COVID-19); therefore, the use of such PD with their teachers and their school leadership teams in a face-to-face venue has potential to have even more engagement and discussion for reflection and improvement in instruction.

While our research-evidence-based PD modules have been linked to improvement in instructional leadership, identifying what practicing and aspiring school leaders learn from professional learning requires further investigation. Yet, conditions to sustain an effective PD require further research. We should also identify to what degree principals receiving the Reflection Cycle as a structure for their self-reflection possess attributes of reflective leaders. More research is undoubtedly needed to find strategic reflection that positively impacts

culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy on high-needs campuses. Future research is suggested to explore funds and resources that can adequately address support and expertise from a variety of organizations and partners in building individual leadership capacity for school transformation efforts, mindfulness, and emotional intelligence through effective and strategic reflection. As school leaders learn more about their own ways of leading high-needs schools via targeted, meaningful, and continuous PD, they can reflect on their experiences and expertise to develop their instructional leadership practices that can improve teachers' pedagogy for EBs.

Acknowledgments

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